LIVED EXPERIENCES OF EMPOWERMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF A VOCATIONAL TRAINING
PROGRAMME FOR WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Lived experiences of empowerment: A case study of a vocational training programme for women in Bangladesh

This thesis explores how low-income women in Bangladesh experience empowerment on a day to day basis. I take a holistic approach incorporating economic, social and embodied dimensions of empowerment into the analysis. I seek to understand how women are able to reshape their lives, make their own choices and open new spaces for themselves. The vocational training programme for poor rural women by the grassroots organisation Gonoshasthaya Kendra provides the setting for my case study of women's empowerment. The research on which this thesis is based employed an in-depth qualitative methodology, participant observation and a social survey of current trainees.

The Gonoshasthaya Kendra programme aims to challenge the myths and misinterpretations surrounding appropriate roles for women in Bangladeshi society. It does this by offering non-traditional employment training for women. Participants are trained in skilled manual and technical trades and services such as welding, carpentry, plumbing, printing and professional driving.

In addition to creating new employment opportunities, Gonoshasthaya Kendra provides a space for women to establish collective social relationships. These offer women a source of social support which can complement or even replace family and kinship networks. They can also form the basis for collective action in pursuit of women's interests. The experience of Gonoshasthaya Kendra women serves to demonstrate to their families and communities that alternative gender roles are possible in Bangladesh.

I argue for a reassessment of current notions of empowerment, stressing women's own accounts of their lived and embodied experiences. This approach to understanding empowerment acknowledges women's agency and ability to effect change in their own lives and in those of others. This thesis also contributes to challenging the representation of women in Bangladesh as a victimised, powerless and invisible group.
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Changing social landscapes

My thesis explores women's lived experiences of empowerment. At the core of my research is an in-depth analysis of a selected group of women's life histories, of women who came to seek work at an indigenous non-governmental organisation (NGO) for survival reasons. The experiences and self-perceptions of these individual women are contextualised and historicised within the wider framework of globalisation and women's recent increased participation in the labour market in Bangladesh. The country's shift from subsistence to capitalist production has led to significant changes in its rural landscape. Women have lost their status in agricultural production and been pushed in high numbers into wage dependency as a result of increased pauperisation trends (Akhter 1995, McCarthy and Feldman 1983, Westergaard 1983). Market forces and mainstream development institutions claim to have 'discovered' rural women as under-utilised human resources (McCarthy and Feldman 1983). One can witness this trend particularly in growing new industries such as the garment factories, where women's abundant cheap labour is being fed into. And the development establishment - in line with adjustment policies of the 1980s - is training up poor women (and men) into becoming 'self-sufficient' by incorporating them into mainstream development via income generation and credit schemes.

Globalisation and pauperisation trends have also led to notable migratory processes in Bangladesh. Migration takes place on all levels: transnational, for example, when men, unable to provide adequately for their families, migrate to foreign countries for work. Women are left behind and often their husbands never come back. Aware of the fact that the institution of marriage has become unstable, women themselves are usually left with no alternative than to migrate to the urban centres for survival. Poverty, loss of land and stagnant rural labour markets are major reasons for regional migration from rural to urbanising areas. This trend is usually accompanied by an increase in the nuclearisation of families. Migration also occurs on a more local scale. Abandoned women who no longer have a home in their villages sometimes find new homes in NGOs situated in the neighbourhood. There are NGOs, such as my case study organisation
Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK), that provide such women with an alternative home.

The transformation of rural landscapes in Bangladesh, however, has not only resulted in the devaluation of women’s former roles in subsistence production. The current climate in Bangladesh has great potential for changing gender relations. Women are dealing with alternative roles and have become visible and active social agents, negotiating multiple identities. Some NGOs in Bangladesh have opened up new opportunities for women. Access to organisational support networks have encouraged women to challenge existing cultural and patriarchal gender hierarchies. Several organisations have managed to operate successfully as facilitators of poor women’s (and men’s) empowerment. My thesis aims to provide an understanding of this process of empowerment from the perspective of the women involved in GK.

The theoretical framework of my research draws on two bodies of literature: recent feminist debates on empowerment and the gender and development discourse.

1.2 Feminist notions of empowerment

The term empowerment is popular in various disciplines, not only in the current Gender and Development (GAD) debates, which is where my interest lies in. In South Asia many NGOs emphasise empowerment as an objective. They have different strategies or entry points - for example education, health, income generation or credit - to initiate the process of empowering the poor. In this context the word ‘empowerment’ is often used however, as a synonym for terms such as ‘integrated rural development’, ‘women’s development’ and ‘conscientisation’ (Batliwala 1993:7). Empowerment is also a key goal of third world feminist grassroots organisations seeking to move beyond the Women in Development (WID) focus on equality with men.

There are different interpretations of how empowerment relates to women’s gender needs and interests. One school of thought lays out a planning framework for organisations by addressing two separate sets of ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’
gender needs and interests (Molyneux 1985, Moser 1993). Others have argued for a link between the two through 'transformatory potentials' of NGO strategies for empowerment (Kabeer 1994, 1995a, Young 1988, 1993). 'Practical' gender needs concern, food, water, shelter, health, income and access to education, training and credit. The policies therefore address the conditions of women's daily life. The corresponding policies of 'strategic' gender interests on the other hand are directed at transforming the roles society ascribes to women and men. They envision a future where inequalities between men and women no longer exist. The feminist debates recognise cultural, ethnic, racial and class differences, but argue that women can unite around certain issues they have in common, such as the aim to change traditional gender roles and the unequal distribution of resources between the genders, to overcome the sexual division of labour, the alleviation of domestic burdens and child care and the fight against male violence and control of sexuality. It was argued, however, that the distinction between 'practical' and 'strategic' gender needs and interests runs the risk of setting 'strategic' gender interests 'aside as feminist concerns' and becoming irrelevant to planners and development practitioners (Young 1993:155). The concept of 'transformatory potential' proposes a fusion between 'practical' and 'strategic' gender needs and interests. The following NGO initiatives, for example, are believed to be transformatory:

* providing new economic resources (e.g. non-traditional employment) as opposed to resources that only reinforce women's traditional roles within the society,
* creating new forms of collective relationships for women and
* encouraging collective action (Kabeer 1995a:115).

Feminist notions of empowerment are all directed towards collective action, which is described as a 'collective experience of struggle' aimed at ending 'discriminatory practices' (Young 1993:157) (e.g. protests against dowry and wife-beating, fights for legal rights and equal pay). So far most of the feminist empowerment discourse, however, has focused on theorising concepts of empowerment for the 'others' (the victimised third world women), rather than exploring how empowerment is practised and lived by these 'others'.

While there is much debate at the theoretical level as to what empowerment comprises and how it best can be achieved, there has
been little primary research at the grassroots level to contribute to our understanding of what empowerment means in everyday terms (Carr et al. 1996:3).

I address this gap in the literature by presenting an analysis of empowerment from the perspective of third world women's day to day experiences of empowerment. Aware of post-colonial critique of (mis)-representing and using third world women as 'native informants' (Spivak 1988), I argue that an in-depth insight into women's own perspectives of change and empowerment is necessary for any development intervention that claims to be gender-sensitive. 'Situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991, Harding 1991, Rose 1997) of third world women's daily experiences and struggles is a necessary condition for facilitating empowerment as it indicates which factors hinder or foster women's empowerment. Reaching this level of understanding becomes an increasingly urgent matter in the context of recent cooption of empowerment concepts by the mainstream development establishment. The redefinition of empowerment strategies according to women's needs and interests lays out the foundation for the feminist vision of mobilising poor women (and men) into collective action. One should keep in mind, however, that 'situated knowledge' does not claim for universal applicability. It remains limited, partial and uncertain. According to Rose (1997:319):

We cannot know everything, nor can we survey power as if we can fully understand, control or redistribute it. What we may be able to do is something rather more modest but, perhaps, rather more radical: to inscribe into our research practices some absences and fallibilities while recognising that the significance of this does not rest entirely in our hands.

1.3 Development, gender and empowerment in Bangladesh

Poverty alleviation approaches have always been prone to follow general economic trends and development fashions. Over the last decades development strategies have gone through major shifts. Welfare-oriented NGO programmes of the 1950s and 1960s began to take a different shape under the influence of dependency theories and Freire's (1972) methods of conscientisation. Concepts of awareness- and consciousness-raising were much talked about in the 1970s and most NGOs, inspired by Freire, incorporated his educational approach into
their agenda. The international political and economic climate of structural adjustment and Bangladesh’s national efforts to follow an export-oriented industrialisation strategy in the 1980s, however, was soon reflected in the development arena. Consciousness-raising efforts were eventually replaced by income-generation programmes.

Empowerment emerged as an alternative concept to mainstream development approaches in the mid 1980s, but has already been hijacked by international development agencies. Their interpretation of empowerment implied freeing governments from their responsibilities in providing welfare services to the poor and expecting the poor to take care of themselves with a little help from their friends: the NGOs. Micro-credit became the ‘miracle cure’ of the 1990s and was meant to lift the poor out of their misery and turn them into self-sufficient small scale entrepreneurs. As credit has become the dish of the day amongst donors it is not surprising that there is hardly an NGO in Bangladesh that has not jumped on the bandwagon of credit provision for the poor by now. Also ‘gender’ has become a popular term in the development dictionary and has thus become an imperative component in most NGO programmes. The dominant understanding of ‘gender’, however, seems to centre around securing women economic benefits rather than addressing gendered power relationships.

As far as research on women in Bangladesh is concerned most work concentrates on evaluating either government or NGO anti-poverty programmes. The evaluation results are then fed back to the mainstream agencies who are the sponsors of this literature. So far not enough attention has been given to the perspectives of the ‘beneficiaries’ of these development programmes. I therefore intend to address this gap in the empowerment and the development literature by investigating the lived experiences of empowerment of women engaged with GK. GK is one of the few organisations in Bangladesh that have applied innovative strategies of empowerment. It combines women’s material well-being (practical needs) with strategies of awareness-raising (strategic needs). GK was a pioneer in offering women training in non-traditional manual and technical skills. My interest lies in understanding how women involved in an organisation like GK themselves perceive the changes happening in their lives. I explore the every-day life experiences of these women by tracing back their memories and
recollections of former village life in my search to understand whether and how they are adapting to their new work and living circumstances. What does working and (for some) living in GK mean for the women? How does this new working/living environment influence the way they think and behave? In what activities do they engage daily? Whom do they meet at GK? What do they talk about with other people at GK? I am interested in understanding how women feel in a place like GK and whether the experiences they make there (e.g. doing non-traditional work, interacting with strangers) and the place itself (enclosed community) have an impact on their bodily transformation.

1.4 Transformation of women's bodily landscapes

Recently the body has received increased attention in academic discourses as well as popular interest. Most of the literature, however, reflects on how people in the West perceive their bodies.

In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity (Shilling 1993:4-5).

There is a current tendency in the West to focus on reconstructing the body into a healthier, fitter and better-looking object. People are absorbed by 'competitive pressures of self-presentation' (Shilling 1993:92) visible in the increased phenomena of anorexia and eating disorders, a recent obsession with fitness, slimness and plastic surgery. I believe that women in Bangladesh are also discovering new ways of self-presentation through their bodies, however, in a completely different context. Whereas people in the West are usually in the financial position to be able to slim down and beautify their 'well-fed bodies' with the help of diets, health products and fitness training; poor women in Bangladesh come to organisations such as GK with 'skinny undernourished bodies' basically for survival. Only with a regular income can they now afford more than just one meal per day for themselves and their families. Access to subsidised health care, knowledge about health, nutrition and hygiene matters allows them to develop healthier bodies over time. I argue that the women involved in GK are experiencing an embodied dimension of empowerment. When negotiating their
new identities, however, they do not demonstrate these through fit, slim and sexy bodies as in the West, but through a transformed way of talking, asserting themselves towards others, moving, appearing and presenting themselves in public spaces.

I draw on Giddens’s (1984), Goffman’s (1959, 1963) and Mauss’s (1973) concepts of the body when exploring the transformation of women’s bodies during their experiences at GK. In Goffman’s work, for example

... the management of the body is central to the maintenance of encounters, social roles and social relations, and also mediates the relationship between an individual’s self-identity and their social identity (Shilling 1993:74).

Goffman’s specific contribution to literature lies in demonstrating the significance of ‘interaction practices’ as acts of interaction were not studied before him (Kendon 1988). Rather than presenting the outcomes of interaction he was interested in how it was done. I translate Goffman’s ‘interaction practices’ into the embodied empowerment practices of women as my intention is to show how empowerment is practised in women’s daily bodily performances.

The body, however, is an area of research to which neither empowerment nor GAD debates in Bangladesh have given any particular significance. In mainstream development literature women’s bodies were either reduced to human resources for productive purposes or targeted as means to implement population control. In her bibliography on research on women in Bangladesh Islam, M. (1994) identified following gaps in the literature: feminism and the women’s movement, feminist methodology, women in patriarchy, structural adjustment and women, and women and social change. Again, one finds no reference to how the process of change affects women’s bodies, how women’s bodily landscapes become transformed and how women practise empowerment through their bodies.

Even feminist debates in South Asia have failed to incorporate an understanding of women’s bodies that goes beyond issues of production, reproduction and sexual oppression (e.g. the maternal body, the body as bearer of women’s double burden, the victimised body). Recent work on women’s empowerment has begun to
challenge the notion of women as victims. However, when speaking of empowerment and collective action, feminists seem to focus on the mind and consciousness, ignoring the physical aspects of women's empowerment process:

[T]he process of empowerment begins in the mind, from woman's consciousness ... from believing in her innate right to dignity and justice, and realising that it is she, along with her sisters, who must assert that right ... (Batliwala 1993:9).

This approach envisions a certain outcome *i.e.* women fighting collectively for their rights, but fails to explain how change manifests itself in women's bodies. When women experience empowerment they do this through their bodies in both mental and physical terms. Empowerment, however, is a process, it is not a means to an end. Before being able to think of possible outcomes of empowerment, one needs to first ask the women themselves how they experience processes of change through their bodies. I therefore find it timely and crucial to include an analysis of the body into the GAD discourse. The implication of this must be to achieve a deeper understanding of how development intervention, directed towards women's empowerment, affects women's bodies and their relation to their bodies and to use this as a basis for strategic gender-sensitive development policy.

1.5 Thesis outline

In the following paragraphs I describe how the gaps I have identified in the literature on women in Bangladesh have been addressed in my thesis structure. Chapter Two presents a general overview of the GAD debate and draws out the limitations of existing empowerment theories, one of the main limitations being the lack of attention given to embodied aspects of women's empowerment. Chapter Three describes my research methodology. Here I explain the choice of my case study organisation GK and the underlying rationale for selecting feminist ethnography as my core method for investigating the lived experiences of women's empowerment. In the conclusion of that chapter I reflect on my role as a feminist researcher and illustrate how I dealt with issues of positioning, representation and authenticity in the field.
Chapter Four serves as an introduction to the setting of my research: the case study organisation GK. The chapter begins with a general overview of women’s position in Bangladesh and the role NGOs play in terms of promoting women’s empowerment. I then move on to discuss the history, philosophy and internal structure of the organisation GK. Like most NGOs in Bangladesh GK is not immune to internal power structures and hierarchies. I therefore discuss both positive and negative aspects of GK’s approach to women’s empowerment. The chapter ends with a general profile of the type of women who come to work at GK.

How women experience the process of adaption to a new world and way of life through their engagement with GK is analysed in my empirical chapters: Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Both theoretical aspects of empowerment as well as the women’s own perceptions of change influenced the way I structured my empirical chapters into socio-economic (Chapter Five), socio-political (Chapter Six) and embodied (Chapter Seven) dimensions of empowerment. Kabeer’s (1995a) concept of ‘transformatory potential’ of NGO strategies for empowerment forms the theoretical framework of my structure in terms of how I understand the organisation GK in my thesis. According to Kabeer NGO strategies can be transformatory in their provision of ‘new economic resources’ (Chapter Five) and their provision of space to establish ‘new forms of collective relationships’ with the potential for collective action (Chapter Six).

Changes from the women’s perspective appear to have taken place in terms of increased material resources, a certain degree of economic independence and self-respect (Chapter Five); the ability to ‘mix’ with other non-family related people and a feeling of being ‘more intelligent’ than before (Chapter Six) and an increase in confidence and assertiveness notable in their transformed body language and behaviour (Chapter Seven). In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I therefore provide a holistic approach towards women’s empowerment process:

Chapter Five presents GK in its role as a work place which offers women ‘new economic resources’ in the form of non-traditional training and employment opportunities. In this chapter I describe the women’s reasons for engaging in wage employment and how they adapt to this new experience. How women
negotiate their work at GK with their families forms part of the analysis in the
next section. Here I also illustrate women's increased sense of self-worth through
their work experience at GK. At the end of this chapter I point out the agency's
limitation in securing women non-traditional work elsewhere.

In Chapter Six I investigate how women build up 'collective relationships' in GK,
concentrating on its role as a gender-sensitive organisation, which provides a
space where women can mix with other non-related men and women. This
chapter illustrates women's mental and physical voyage from their home villages
to the organisation GK. The first section describes women's memories and
perceptions of village life and their partly stereo-typed images of village women.
I move on to explore women's learning and interacting processes within GK and
illustrate their sense of solidarity with other women and oppressed groups.

Chapter Seven underpins my reflections from the previous two chapters by
describing women's embodied experiences of empowerment in the course of their
involvement in GK, both in its role as an employer and as a gender-sensitive
organisation offering women their own dedicated spaces of 'social interaction'
(Goffman 1983a). On the one hand their engagement in 'masculine' work has
transformed women's attitude towards themselves, their behaviour towards
others and their bodily postures and performances. On the other hand women are
exposed to daily contact and interaction with others, with whom they have no kin
relations. Women's proximity to men from other families is particularly unusual
in Bangladesh as it clashes with Islamic notions of propriety. Cultural norms of
idealised 'feminine' virtues (silence, invisibility, immobility, sexual purity,
obedience) socialise women into denying their own bodies and concealing their
personalities and identities. The ideal behaviour for Bengali Muslim women
entails hidden bodies and low voices. On joining GK, however, many women have
started to change their relation to their bodies. Their behaviour reflects the
personal struggles and strategic choices of contesting conventional idealised
images of women. Women at GK are actively challenging prescribed notions of
womanhood, family, sexuality and shame.

In Chapter Eight I summarise the most important themes in my thesis and
argue that the women at GK have become active agents of change. However, one
needs to acknowledge the fact that change is a contradictory process. I do this by examining the limitations in women's personal experiences of empowerment when negotiating their multiple identities with their families and communities. I then return to the theoretical discussion of empowerment by revealing some of its ambiguities. The chapter ends with suggestions for future research.

Notes

1. The concept of empowerment is used, for example, in the Black movement in the US, in political philosophy, adult education, economic development, community work, social work, business management, leisure sciences.

2. I understand the term 'third world' as problematic and inadequate. Lacking an appropriate alternative term I use it in this context for formerly colonised societies. See also Mohanty's (1991) critique of Western feminists 'production of the "Third World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject'.


Chapter Two: Rethinking empowerment

2.1 Introduction

Empowerment is one of the latest buzz-words in the development context. Yet the term is elusive and ill-defined. Empowerment and its root-concept power are therefore interpreted in different ways. Within the social sciences the dominant understanding of power implies ‘power over’, whereas feminists see power in more fluid and unrestricted terms. Feminists perceive the notion of empowerment as a process and highlight the elements of political education and consciousness-raising. However, what is lacking in this analysis is how the process of empowerment is practised and how it affects women’s day to day lives. It fails to demonstrate how women themselves experience and express various stages of empowerment not only in cognitive, but also physical terms. In this thesis I therefore set out to provide a clearer understanding of women’s ‘lived experiences’ of empowerment by also giving attention to the embodied aspects of empowerment.

2.2 Women, gender relations and empowerment

In the 1970s it was recognised that the development programmes and plans of the 1950s and 1960s had failed to alleviate women’s poverty. Esther Boserup was one of the first to argue that third world women had not benefited from development (Boserup 1970). During this period the WID movement emerged as a network of women from various countries seeking to achieve equal participation in the development process for women. Both the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the US women’s movement of the early 1970s had an influence on WID (Tinker 1990). The movement criticised the gender bias of former development programmes focusing on male-headed nuclear family households and proposed women's integration into the development process. Their assumptions were based on liberal neoclassic economic theory and a strong belief in the benefits of modernisation. Development as such was perceived as positive and the unequal treatment women had received compared to men was related to their insufficient participation in development programmes. The
solution was therefore women's integration into economic development. In other words women's increased participation in economic and political life would result in their liberation and sexual equality.

General critiques of the WID approach came mainly from three schools of thought. They differed from traditional Marxism as well as from each other in the way they interpreted sexual inequalities as an explanation of general inequalities (Kabeer 1994). One form of critique came from the 'dependency feminists'. In their view capitalist development marginalises third world women by pushing them into peripheral productive roles. Integration into development was perceived merely as a means of utilising women's cheap labour for export- or market-oriented production. Beneria and Sen (1981), for example, argue that women's economic marginalisation is not a result of their exclusion from productive labour, but from exploitation of their labour in the global system of capitalist labour relations. Women are driven into participating in this unequal system and into entering the labour market for survival. Instead of enabling poor third world women to gain control over land and self-sufficient production, this process pushed them to produce for others in the national or international centres.

Unlike the dependency feminists the 'German Feminist School' (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1981, Mies 1980, 1982, 1986, Mies et al. 1988) did not prioritise class over gender inequalities. They insisted that both men and the capitalist system were benefiting from women's oppression. The expansion of the two-class marxist analysis by Mies (1988a) describes a three-tier model of capital accumulation: capitalists, wage workers (predominantly white men) and at the bottom non-wage workers (mainly women), housewives, and subsistence producers in the colonies (men and women). Just as third world subsistence workers are colonised by the industrial countries and multinationals, women are colonised by men through the 'housewifisation' of their labour, where 'housewifisation' involves unpaid or low paid labour (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1988a, 1988b, von Werlhof 1988a, 1988b). A woman's income earned through integrationist income generation projects is perceived merely as a supplement to that of her husband, the 'breadwinner' of the family.
Towards the late 1980s the GAD approach shifted the focus from 'women' towards 'gender relations'. By emphasising social relations this approach avoided prioritising gender over class differences or vice versa. GAD was influenced by earlier feminist work (Oakley 1972, Rubin 1975, and the Subordination of Women Group 1979) which argued against the way gender differences were generally related to 'sexually differentiated bodies' rather than 'socially differentiated arrangements of gender' (Kabeer 1994:55). GAD is a much wider concept than WID as it takes away the focus on women and highlights the power relations between men and women. It attempts to understand how these relationships, as a construct of society, perpetuate women's subordination.

[GAD] tackled not just the nature of women's various roles (as reflected in WID), but the interactions of those roles with those of men...[it] is an approach concerned not simply with women's roles, therefore, but with the dynamics and structures of gender relations (Rowlands 1998:15).

Terms such as gender, however, are interpreted in different ways. Amongst many NGOs in Bangladesh, for example, gender is often just understood as a fashionable western substitute label for women. Even institutions such as the World Bank are now appropriating gender into their language. The danger in this process lies in risking the depolitisation of feminism. In other words feminism is being coopted (Akhter, personal communication, 1994, Baden and Goetz 1998, Razavi and Miller 1995). Women are used as means in dominant development institutions' pursuit of their own (rather than women's) ends - for example, population control or structural adjustment policies (Antrobus 1989).

Kabeer (1994) warns of cases where the result of the linguistic shift towards gender has actually been counterproductive to the women's cause as... it has provided an excuse to abandon any measures intended specifically to benefit women. Understanding gender to refer literally to women and men, they argue that women-focused policies and projects go against the spirit of a gender analysis... Some organisations have thus embraced the shift to gender because it appears to relieve them of the need to concern themselves with the specific problems that women face within their internal structures... (Kabeer 1994:xii).

Whilst development policies for women like the equity, anti-poverty and
efficiency approaches were closely tied in with the WID ideology, gender and development debates laid the ground for the more recent empowerment approach (Rowlands 1998). The empowerment approach is regarded as independent of the general development establishment and aims at reducing inequality between men and women through bottom-up mobilisation (Moser 1993). Proponents of ‘alternative developments’ (Friedmann 1992) lay a strong emphasis on people’s empowerment. The empowerment approach emerged in the mid 1980s from a strong criticism of women’s integration into mainstream ‘eurocentric’ development and from disillusionment with the WID approaches which had failed to acknowledge the possibility of women’s ‘double exploitation through class and gender relations’ (Wood 1992:16).

The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’ (Freire 1972:48).

The empowerment approach has its roots in Freire’s conscientisation approach, which is based on the assumption that an individual’s ‘ontological and historical vocation ... [lies in becoming] ... more fully human’ (Freire 1972:31). However, the ‘pursuit of full humanity [should not be] carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity’ (Freire 1972:58). Human beings are ‘subjects’ capable of transforming their world by overcoming everything that is dehumanising. According to Freire’s philosophy all human beings, even if they are kept ‘submerged’ in the ‘culture of silence’, have the potential to reach a critical perception of reality and its contradictions. Through what he calls ‘problem-posing education’ and ‘dialogical encounters with others’, the ‘oppressed’ can become conscious of their own realities and react in a critical way individually and collectively. In his model of a liberating education Freire (1972:46) dissolves the teacher-student contradiction and emphasises that ‘both are simultaneously teachers and students’. The ‘dialogical educators’, ‘humanists’ or ‘revolutionary leaders’, as Freire refers to them, are only truly committed to the people if they ‘convert’ to the people.

Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth ... Only through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving ... (Freire 1972:37).
Feminists expanded this approach by incorporating the gender aspect that was lacking in Freire's analysis (Batliwala 1993). Empowerment became the key goal of feminist grassroots organisations aiming to move beyond integration and the WID focus on women's productivity. The policy approach has been theorised by a network of women's organisations called DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). Their vision of an alternative society providing new strategies of peace and justice challenges all oppressive structures.

2.3 The concept of empowerment

The concept of empowerment, however, is problematic as the literature does not offer a clear definition of the term. Neither does the word translate neatly into other languages (Dawson 1998). Hence different camps have made use of the concept according to their own agendas. The World Bank's or UN bodies' understanding of the term empowerment, for example, is different from that of feminist grassroots organisations. Part of the problem lies in the root-concept power and the various interpretations of this term.

2.3.1 Different understandings of power

The concept of power and the question of how to analyze it has been a central topic of debate in the social sciences since the 1960s. It was complicated further when ... 'empowerment' was introduced, with the idea that some can act on others to give them power or enable them to realise their own potential (Nelson and Wright 1995:7).

Feminists have drawn on the work of various writers in their attempts to define empowerment and its root-concept power. Interpretations of power within contemporary social sciences tend to centre around the concepts of 'power to' and 'power over'. 'Power to' has been related to a person's development and growth, where their increased power is not at the expense of another's. This interpretation of power, however, runs the risk of being too narrowly defined, suggesting that power is a 'personal attribute' (Nelson and Wright 1995:8). Hartsock (1984) on the other hand defined this type of power as a generative,
productive power that stimulates collective activity.

The most conventional model of power is ‘power over’ and involves access to decision-making and tangible resources. Kabeer (1994) associates this notion of power with the WID literature, where access to income, for example, was expected to result in increased decision-making power within the household. ‘Power over’ is not limited to the household sphere. It involves people, groups or public institutions having control over others and benefiting at the expense of others. This definition of power is set in the context of dominance and obedience. Bachrach and Baratz (1970) added a further dimension to ‘power over’, whereby power is exerted even without open conflict: for example, when a group prevents others from expressing their interests. In this case, rather than having a group take decisions against the will of others, the result is ‘non decision-making’.

Lukes (1974) analyses a different example of ‘power over’ where there is neither open nor suppressed conflict. Both sides, the dominant as well as the subordinate, are either unaware of, deny or avoid conflict and continue to accept existing power relations and roles as given. Lack of awareness of the fact that one is dominated by those in power is what Rowlands calls ‘internalised oppression’.

Various feminist writers have described the way in which people who are systematically denied power and influence in the dominant society internalise the messages they receive about what they are supposed to be like, and how they may come to believe the messages to be true (Rowlands 1995:102).

Kabeer (1994) relates this interpretation of power by Lukes (where power relations are accepted as given) to the feminist notion of ‘power within’. She argues that women are not necessarily unaware of power relations, but appear at first sight to accept them, as they are not visibly contesting them. Behind this appearance, however, women might have deliberately opted for the strategy of ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti 1988).

Women may find it strategic to avoid or defuse potentially conflicting situations with men because they recognise that the rules of the game are loaded against them and the costs of
confrontation are likely to be high (Kabeer 1994:227).

'Bargaining with patriarchy' therefore implies women deliberately choosing to appear 'disempowered' by trading in independence for protection and security. Instead of open confrontation women often tend to develop their own strategies of resistance towards patriarchal power structures. White (1992:88) mentions women’s ‘informal cooperation’ networks and Kabeer (1994:129) refers to women using ‘trusted allies’ such as relatives or neighbours for small businesses and secretive lending and borrowing of money. Abdullah and Zeidenstein (1982:47) describe women hiding their savings ‘in holes in the bamboo, in the roof, or under piles of cloth’.

2.3.2 Different interpretations of empowerment

This section describes how understandings of ‘power’ as in ‘power to’/'power for’/power within’ and ‘power over’ translate into different models of empowerment. Although originally defined as a bottom-up approach (Moser 1993) empowerment has already been coopted by the international development establishment. It has rapidly entered the terminology of mainstream development planning. These top-down planning models tend to reduce the concept of empowerment to that of economic empowerment. Intervention is usually short term and addresses only women's basic needs. Basic or ‘practical needs’ (Molyneux 1985, Moser 1993) concern food, water, shelter, health, income, credit and education. The policies therefore remain limited to the conditions of women's daily life. A recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) publication on poverty alleviation, for example, regards basic education and skills training, basic health, nutrition and family planning, and credit as the most important areas of empowerment (Haq 1995). Top-down planning models which focus entirely on women's basic needs tend to objectify women as beneficiaries of basic services. Women are taught skills ‘to become better mothers and more productive workers’ (Gallin et al. 1989:7). Jackson (1998:40) points out the World Bank’s instrumentalist approach to women, where investment in ‘healthy mothers’ is not only beneficial to their families, but also cost effective. These models adopt 'soft options' that avoid issues of structural reform or the
contestation of existing power relations.

Kate Young criticises the way mainstream development associates empowerment with entrepreneurial self-reliance:

The term appears to mean entrepreneurial self-reliance, and echoes the general emphasis within the mainstream ... on entrepreneurial capitalism and market forces ... [and] on limiting state provision of welfare, services and employment. It is closely allied to the current emphasis on individualistic values: people 'empowering themselves' by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps ... (Young 1993:159).

Feminists, on the other hand, advocate 'redistributive approaches', where development is perceived not only in economic terms, but also as a social and political process (Gallin et al. 1989). While short term goals are still necessary, they are regarded as insufficient for development in the long run. The redistributive perspective 'defines problems within a complex holistic context, challenging existing gender and, often, class hierarchies' with an understanding that the 'transformation of inequitable institutions' requires a long term approach (Gallin et al. 1989:8). These policies also address 'strategic' gender needs and interests (Molyneux 1985, Moser 1993), aiming to challenge women's subordinate position in society, for example, changing traditional gender roles, overcoming the existing sexual division of labour and alleviating the burden of domestic duties and child care. They seek to transform women's position and role in the household, the local community and society at large.

A feminist conceptualisation of empowerment therefore embraces both 'power over' and 'power to'. It goes beyond the conventional interpretation of 'power over' as access to decision-making and tangible resources. 'Power over' must also entail

... understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression ... Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space, and so overlaps with the other categories of 'power to' and 'power from within' (Rowlands 1995:102).

Empowerment is therefore not the result of power being bestowed on 'passive' women by others, but, rather a process where women feel enabled to acquire
power themselves. During this process people, organisations or other sources can act as facilitators of empowerment, but not as 'givers' of empowerment.

[Development agencies] cannot 'give' empowerment to their 'beneficiaries', 'targets of development' or 'clients' ... [P]eople have to be able to use their 'power to' to negotiate and transform those ... who have institutional and structural 'power over' (Nelson and Wright 1995:18).

The feminist approach towards empowerment highlights the notion of a process. This is in contrast to conventional development projects, which tend to be bound within fixed time limits.

There is general unanimity that empowerment does not refer to an end-of-project product or state that can be attained within defined time-frames. Instead, empowerment is best understood as a dynamic and on-going process which can only be located on a continuum (Shetty 1991:13).

Schuler (1986), for example, identifies various stages within the process of empowerment, moving from individual to collective consciousness-raising to mobilisation in pursuit of political and legal change. In Sharma's (1991-92) model the process of empowerment involves individual self-assertion, collective resistance and mobilisation that challenges power relations. Rowlands (1997) classifies the process of empowerment into three levels: personal empowerment, empowerment in close relationships and collective empowerment. 'Personal empowerment' involves the ability to develop a sense of self, to build up confidence and the capacity to act and influence decision-making and to overcome internalised oppression. Empowerment in 'close relationships' refers to women negotiating and influencing decisions in relationships. 'Collective empowerment' is described as a situation 'where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone' (Rowlands 1995:103).

Like the authors mentioned above Batliwala (1993, 1994) refers to empowerment as a process i.e. 'the process of gaining control - over the self, over ideology and the resources which determine power' and calls for 'a redistribution of power' at all levels. She differentiates five types of resources: physical, human (people, bodies, labour and skills), intellectual, financial and the self. The self is described as a 'combination of intelligence, creativity, self-esteem and confidence'
(Batliwala 1993:9). With control over ideology she means 'the ability to generate, propagate, sustain, and institutionalise specific sets of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviour - virtually determining how people perceive and function within given socioeconomic and political environments' (Batliwala 1994:129). Her detailed conceptual framework of women's empowerment in South Asia draws on the experiences of various regional organisations that came together in a workshop on women and development held in Nepal. The participants, who came from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, shared their experiences with empowerment and poverty alleviation projects.

Hashemi and Schuler (1993) have developed a model that measures the impact NGO activities have had on women's empowerment. Their model is well-known and commonly used in Bangladesh. The authors have developed a range of empowerment indicators. These proxy indicators are expected to facilitate the evaluation of NGO interventions aiming at empowerment. Staff of various NGOs in Bangladesh dealing with women's empowerment were asked to describe what changes they had observed in the participating women making them think that these women were becoming empowered. Hashemi and Schuler came up with six major areas where empowerment was believed to follow NGO interventions and general socio-economic changes. The six areas are:

1. sense of self and vision of a future
2. mobility and visibility
3. ability to earn a living
4. decision-making power within the household
5. ability to interact effectively in the public sphere
6. participation in non-family groups.

According to the authors the most significant transformation in a woman's life is her changing 'sense of self worth'. Self-confidence is directly related to women's perception of the future: for example, hoping for a better future for themselves and their children (including their daughters) and planning ahead. In the context of rural Bangladesh where the system of purdah (seclusion) is reflected in gender divisions of space, increased physical mobility plays an important role in the process of change. Increased 'mobility' brings about increased 'visibility'. Women's contribution to family income is expected to result in more respect within the
household and higher ‘decision-making power’. With ‘interaction in the public sphere’ the authors mean women’s increased participation in the public sphere, for example, knowledge of legal rights, knowledge of political institutions and the ability to access public resources such as medical treatment, family planning, credit, legal assistance. Through ‘participation in non-family groups’ new identities beyond the institution of family are constructed. Solidarity, awareness of their own position in society and group action fall into the last category. The authors see chances for collective action: ‘Eventually, although still very rarely, women’s groups may achieve the solidarity, confidence and strength to oppose social injustices’ (Hashemi and Schuler 1993:12).

2.4 Strategies towards women’s empowerment


The integrated development approach believes women’s (and men’s) disempowerment is rooted in the lack of access to a variety of resources such as education, skills, information, knowledge and work. The approach therefore provides a whole package of services. Some development agencies organise groups of women to deal with specific problems such as dowry or domestic violence. Others apply an ‘entry point’ strategy - for example health or literacy - to initiate the wider processes of change. The economic approach emphasises women’s low economic status. It tends to concentrate entirely on one aspect of service delivery i.e. credit and income generation and does not challenge the status quo. Its aim is to improve women’s economic security through control over material resources. The consciousness-raising approach, on the other hand, sees women’s subordination as rising out of a complex combination of historical, cultural, socio-economic and political sources. Fieldworkers at the organisational and community level are significant in this approach. They organise women into collectives at the village or neighbourhood level. Issues important to the women
are then tackled by the entire group through a process of dialogue, discussion and analysis. Education is a key element in this approach, which should lead to new forms of consciousness, awareness of class and gender inequalities and self-worth. The 'policy advocacy' approach, which is not grassroots-based like the others, is the training, research and resource agency approach. Organisations in this group may be involved in research on women's issues or they may engage in providing gender training for the staff of other development agencies, function as a legal advice centre, offer women access to information and other public resources, take on the role of advocacy vis-à-vis the state and international agencies or build up international networking to promote women's empowerment at all levels.

The literature on empowerment seems to highlight in particular the economic and socio-political implications of empowerment. I have mentioned how mainstream development planners tend to concentrate on economic empowerment, where women's access to income is expected to lead to increased decision-making within the household. Hence, decision-making models have become major instruments for measuring empowerment. Feminists do not dismiss the significance of women's economic independence. The notion of women's liberation through waged work alone, however, is heavily disputed (Elson and Pearson 1981, Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983, Mackintosh 1990, Mies 1982, 1986, Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Salaff 1990). As Jackson (1998:54) comments:

Money is neither necessary nor sufficient for transforming gender relations.

It is argued that women tend to have different occupations than men, tend to get paid less and tend to be associated with specific types of jobs. Some locate occupational segregation within the home and women's family roles. Time constraints lead to the extra work burden faced by women (Hartmann 1987, Moser 1991) and spatial constraints influence women's choices by encouraging them to work close enough to their homes to be able to combine domestic and waged work (MacKenzie and Rose 1983). Others relate the gender-segmented labour market to sexist attitudes of employers and male workers (Cockburn 1983, 1985, Hearn and Parkin 1987, Game and Pringle 1984, Redclift and Sinclair
Male employers may be reluctant to hire women for the most prized jobs because of gender stereotypes, worries about complaints from male employees, and their more general fears about losing male advantage (Hanson and Pratt 1995:6).

In cases where employers favour women (assembly-line industries such as the garments or electronics industries), the reasons are linked to women's cheaper labour supply, their 'nimble fingers', their 'docility', lack of labour mobility and lesser likelihood of joining trade unions (Elson and Pearson 1981, Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983, Humphrey 1985, Joekes 1987, Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983). Typical 'women's work' is usually perceived as:

- indoor work [and] 'lighter' than men's work; it is clean, safe, physically undemanding, ... requires dexterity rather than 'skill' [and] often has domestic associations; ... [whereas] typical men's work ... evoke[s] images of the outdoors, of strength and physicality, ... may be heavy, dirty, dangerous, ... [and] frequently highly technical ... (Bradley 1989:9).

Such forms of sex-typing are also inherent to most development projects for women. Therefore the provision of training and work for women in 'non-traditional' areas was suggested by some feminists as a possible way to overcome the sexual division of labour (Moser 1991, Rogers 1980).15

The training of women in areas traditionally identified as men's work may ... break down existing occupational segregation, thereby fulfilling the strategic gender need to abolish the sexual division of labour (Moser 1991:92).

According to Kabeer (1995a:115), this may also

... help to continue pushing back the boundaries of what is considered possible or permissible for women to do in a given society.

In the context of Bangladesh, for example, women doing 'men's work' was not considered possible before and is still not considered acceptable now. The notion of training women in 'men's work' in order to reach 'equality', however, is contested by others as it seems to imply that women should conform to masculine standards i.e. 'be as "good" as men, and act like men' (Yasmin 1997:200) and give up their 'feminine' qualities (Eisenstein 1984, Goetz 1997). This debate reflects a shift in feminist thought from an emphasis on equality to that of difference,16 but
... for most feminists it has become apparent that it is more complex than an either/or situation. Increasingly, feminists have realised the importance of avoiding the either/or, both forms of which may be regarded as male-identified. Whether women are defined as the same as men, or different from them, men remain the reference point, the ungendered 'norm' against which women are compared (McDowell and Pringle 1992:13).

My interest lies not so much in understanding whether women are equal to or different from men, but in discovering how their work experience affects them and their relation to others. I intend to explore whether or not women have become economically independent and whether their contribution to the family income has been acknowledged or is still seen as a supplement to men's income. I seek to understand whether women are able to keep any money for themselves or whether all their income is appropriated by their husbands/male guardians as has been observed elsewhere (Ackerly 1997, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996, Montgomery et al. 1994, Samarasinghe 1993, White 1991). Women's income-earning capacity might change their status in the family. On the other hand they might just end up working even more because of the "double day" effect. How do women's husbands adjust to such a situation? What do they think of it? Do they still hold on to their role as 'breadwinners' or do they also take over some of the domestic responsibilities? Does the behaviour of the husbands change and do they think their wives have changed since becoming involved in an NGO? As regards the gender-role reversal approach I want to examine whether women who perform 'men's work' challenge stereotypical images of women's 'docility' or whether they lose their 'femininity'? When discussing the impact waged work has on women I am interested not only in the material but also the less tangible aspects of this work.

As mentioned earlier decision-making approaches have been and still are standard ways of measuring women's economic empowerment and changing gender relations. These approaches, however, have concentrated mainly on women's family roles.  

As women are earning money and organising economic activities, they are expected to have a more prominent role in families' decision-making with respect to expenditure of income and other related family matters (Rahman 1986:67).
Decisions on income expenditure and fertility tend to be the most popular indicators for women's increased household decision-making (Bruce 1985, Elahi 1993, Hashemi and Schuler 1993, 1994, Mizan 1994, Rahman 1986). Other facets of women's lives, however, are ignored. Recent feminist research on women in Bangladesh has gone beyond this narrow perception by addressing women's multiple identities (e.g. Goetz 1996a, Haque 1997, Kabeer 1991, 1995b, White 1992). Paid work might have the potential of leading to women's increased bargaining power and respect in the household. However, one should first attempt to understand the effects paid work might have on women themselves, before jumping to questions about changing gender relations.

In order to achieve empowerment in this area of one's life (that of close relationships), some personal empowerment is necessary: it could be seen as an area of change arising from personal empowerment processes (Rowlands 1998:24).

What seems to get neglected in classical decision-making approaches is the impact paid work might have on women's sense of self (e.g. feeling pride, confidence, job satisfaction, responsibility). I want to understand how women feel about working in 'public', about performing so-called 'men's work'. Is it merely a question of survival or do women's attitudes towards waged work change over time, and if so, why? Do women feel valued for what they are doing and if so, do they only feel valued because they are contributing to the family income? Are women contributing to the family's well-being in other, non-material ways?

As regards appropriate strategies towards women's empowerment feminists argue that

... an exclusive focus on economic activities does not automatically create a space for women to look at their own role as women, or at other problematic aspects of their lives (Rowlands 1995:104).

These 'other aspects in women's lives' can involve, for example, social and political processes. Women's access to alternative social relationships beyond the household is said to play a significant role in the process of empowerment (Kabeer 1995a). Batliwala (1993:13) highlights the need 'to create a separate "time and space" for women to be together as women'. According to Hashemi and Schuler (1993:12) women's 'participation in non-family groups'
... allows women to reduce their emotional dependence on their families and, by building alternative support networks, to increase their potential to assert themselves within the family as well as in the community.

According to these definitions women’s entry into public spaces seems to be a fundamental precondition for their empowerment. In other words, in order to become a ‘member of an association beyond the household’ (Kabeer 1995a:115) women literally have to move out of the household.

In many societies, however, women’s activities are spatially more restricted than those of men and often confined to the private sphere, which

... as an ideal type has traditionally been associated and conflated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family ... [Whereas] [t]he public as an ideal type has traditionally been the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, ... the market place, waged labour, production, the polis, the state, action ... (Duncan 1996:128).

Obviously not all women are restricted in the same way. The degree of divisions between private and public spaces for women varies according to women’s class and cultural background (Moore 1988, di Leonardo 1991) and over time and space (Gregson and Lowe 1989, Dyck 1990). Nevertheless in general women’s movement from the private to the public domains, both physically and metaphorically (for example, in publicity about issues such as domestic violence), is known to be a significant part of women’s liberation (Hearn 1992).

However, if women move into the ‘public’, where exactly can they find the kind of spaces required to establish alternative networks to the conventional family and kinship relations - particularly in contexts where women’s mobility is fairly constrained? Some seem to suggest that development agencies might be able to offer such spaces (Batliwala 1993, Hashemi and Schuler 1993, Kabeer 1995a). Ideally these should be spaces in which women, by coming together and sharing their experiences of subordination, can build up their collective strength that will enable them to eventually engage in transformatory political action.

In this context it is interesting to investigate how women experience the crossing of spatial boundaries between home and work, private and public. Given the
spatial restrictions on women's mobility in Bangladesh this is an enormous step. How do women reflect in retrospect on the cultural structures that had stopped them from moving into the public sphere? How do women look back on their own histories and what are their reasons for resisting restrictions on their mobility?

Development organisations are expected to promote a sense of 'collective identity' (Sharma 1991-92), but does such a 'collective identity' mean anything to the women? Can one assume that a group of women will constitute a collective 'sisterhood' merely because they have similar poverty backgrounds? Assuming women make new friends when joining an organisation, what do they find important in these friendships: having someone to talk to, exchanging views, gathering information, being able to trust someone, not feeling alone? How do women feel in a group? Do they feel stronger? If so, do they feel strong enough to engage in collective political action and is that what they want?

Political empowerment has been described by some as people's participation in political institutions and public life such as political parties, interest groups, NGOs or social movements (Friedmann 1992, Hashemi and Schuler 1993, Karl 1995, UNDP Report 1994). According to Calman (1992) participation in socio-political movements is particularly significant for

... women in the third world, whose opportunities for political participation in traditional political institutions are normally limited, and for whom movement participation is therefore the first, or the most involving, political action in which they have engaged (Calman 1992:10).

Kabeer argues on similar lines, that

... in contexts where norms of seclusion and segregation curtail their ability to participate in community-based networks ... [women's] organisational capacity ... [becomes] a vital instrument for articulating their interests within the development process. However, it has to be built up through a conscious process. If it existed naturally, then the disempowerment of the poor would not be an issue (Kabeer 1994:253).

How is such a conscious process built up? In the South Asian context, for example, group formation is a popular strategy. It aims at encouraging women's socio-political empowerment.
A group approach may allow women to build a sense of solidarity for mutual support, something which men may not need as badly because of their greater social power individually, or which they may have already developed through class-based mobilising (Goetz 1997:12).

The group approach is common to the first three approaches to empowerment described above (integrated, economic and consciousness-raising approach). Women’s collectives are established either in the villages, where a woman’s group ‘becomes the vanguard or vehicle of women’s participation in different activities and processes’ (Batliwala 1993:25) or within an organisation, where women are mobilised into groups through the ‘entry-point’ approach.

Through identification with a supporting (as well as influential and powerful) organisation women are eventually expected to form a collective identity:

Grassroots organisations provide women a collective identity ... Their collective experience of sharing their commonalities and identifying constraints helps them in promoting a collective consciousness of the forces that oppress them as well as the possibilities for action (Sharma 1991-92:40).

‘Collective action’ tends to be the ideal outcome of a feminist perception of empowerment and appears to have political connotations.

Empowerment must entail as an ultimate goal the ability of the disempowered to act collectively in their own practical and strategic interests (Kabeer 1994:256).

What constitutes ‘collective action’? Usually case studies describe what collective action can entail, for example: fighting for legal control of khas\(^ {18} \) land; demanding fair wages; setting up a woman section in the trade union; protesting against illegal divorce, domestic violence, polygamy and dowry practices; organising for the shut down of local liquor shops; retaining control of forests; complaining about local government corruption; fielding candidates in local elections; attending local shalishes\(^ {19} \) and participating in national women’s movements to enhance women’s legal rights (Bhatt 1989; Calman 1992, Kabeer 1994, Karl 1995; Kramsjo and Wood 1992; Rashid and Shahabuddin 1996; Westergaard 1994). What the literature seems to suggest, then, is that the collective consciousness of a group of politically-aware people will translate into collective action; but how do people become politically aware?
The literature on empowerment highlights the element of consciousness-raising as a significant pre-condition for eventual collective political action. Consciousness- or awareness raising strategies have been a significant theme in development debates since the early 1970s. A different question is, however, whether this focus on awareness is as important to women in the grassroots. Do they think their awareness needs to be ‘raised’? If so, by whom? Are NGOs the external ‘facilitators’ of women’s awareness? Does the concept of awareness-raising imply that women do not have enough awareness when they join an NGO? Does such a notion not run the risk of being patronising? Do women need an NGO to become more aware or are there any other mechanisms in their lives that will have an influence on their thought processes? I believe it is important to find out what women think of the educational strategies offered to them by development organisations. Are they relevant to their day to day lives? Have they made any significant changes in their lives? In what ways do women benefit from education and awareness-raising packages? Maybe there are areas that have not been covered in these programmes, but which are of importance to the women involved. In short, I think it is important to try to understand what education and awareness means to the women. Some women might develop entirely new ideas through their experience at an NGO. Others might build on existing ideas, which mature and become more sophisticated there. Does the organisational environment stimulate women to expand their thinking processes? Does it change women’s world views? If so, how do women adapt to these new world views?

2.5 Ignoring embodied aspects of empowerment

Feminists have emphasised Freire’s conscientisation approach as a route to political awareness. Adult education is central in this approach, but it involves far more than mere literacy (Kabeer 1994). It centres around class and gender based themes and encourages women (and men) to analyze and question existing power relations and unjust practices within their social environment. The educational strategy aims at ‘strengthen[ing] women’s analytical and strategic qualities’ (Batliwala 1993:34). Such a learning process is essential for raising women’s awareness which Batliwala and others perceive as the key to their
The process of empowerment begins in the mind, from woman’s consciousness ... from believing in her innate right to dignity and justice, and realising that it is she, along with her sisters, who must assert that right ... (Batliwala 1993:9).

Assuming - after having gone through the required learning process - a woman reaches the level of political awareness needed for becoming politically empowered, how does her individual awareness then translate into ‘collective action’ of an entire group? Some women might require more time than others to become politically aware. How does one know that the time is ripe for ‘collective action’? Does the existing literature not make too big of a jump on the empowerment ‘continuum’? What about the phase between a woman’s political awareness and a group’s ‘collective action’? What is the individual woman experiencing during that time that would make her decide to participate in ‘collective action’? ‘Collective action’ does not happen over night. What triggers it off? How can such collective political action be stimulated?

In order to get a better grip on ‘collective action’ I believe one needs to step back and rewind the process of empowerment. One should spend some more time exploring the individual’s reactions to the learning processes and new experiences in all their economic, social and political variations. There is no doubt that these experiences have an influence on women’s thoughts. This might lead to serious changes in some women’s world views - for others it might even lead to radical breaks with their past - but these changes are not only reflected in women’s minds. Changes are also expressed through their bodies. Collective political action involves a certain degree of political awareness, but is nevertheless an ‘action’. The notion of social change through ‘collective action’ means that people are ‘acting out’ change and action requires the physical use of the body.

However, none of the gender and development or empowerment debates refer to the embodied aspect of empowerment. The body is mentioned sporadically in the literature, mainly in association with women’s health, fertility and sexuality. For example, in a speech by the Netherlands Minister of Development Cooperation,
women’s physical autonomy is described as

... greater authority over their own bodies; control over their fertility [and] control over their own sexuality ... (cited in Karl 1995:104).

Batliwala speaks of women’s bodies on similar lines in her definition of the consciousness raising approach, in which

[w]omen’s knowledge of their bodies and ability to control reproduction are also considered vital (Batliwala 1994:136).

If referred to at all in the existing literature, the body tends to be treated more as an appendage than an essential part of empowerment. It seems that the academic overemphasis on the intellect and mind has seriously neglected the fact that empowerment also has a physical dimension. Ignoring the physicality of empowerment, however, implies that feminist theory on empowerment ends up playing into the hands of the masculinist hegemony of knowledge rather than attempting to subvert the mind/body dualism. For me empowerment means that a person simultaneously exercises confidence and power through his or her awareness and body deportment.

2.6 Exploring human embodied behaviour

For a clearer understanding of the embodied aspects of empowerment I draw on the work of Giddens (1984), Goffman (1959, 1963) and Mauss (1973), and in particular their notions of ‘human agency’, ‘interaction practices’ and ‘body techniques’. Giddens’s theory of structuration (1984) perceives people as active agents. They are not only active but ‘knowledgeable agents’ who are capable of reflexively monitoring their actions. They know about the ‘conditions and consequences of what they do in their day to day lives’ (Giddens 1984:281). Giddens, however, does not separate agency from structure. They are not perceived as ‘two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality ... [where] the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise’ (Giddens 1984:25). In his model structures (sets of rules and resources) are not seen only as constraints, but can be both constraining and enabling.
Each of the various forms of constraint are thus also, in varying ways, forms of enablement. They serve to open up certain possibilities of action at the same time as they restrict or deny others (Giddens 1984: 173-4).

Human agency does not take place in a void - in a vacuum. In Giddens's model it is 'contextually situated' within temporal and spatial frameworks. According to Giddens, individuals are positioned both in daily 'time-space paths' as well as within their 'life paths'. These positions can be within various zones ranging from home, work, neighbourhood, city or nation to worldwide systems (Giddens 1984:85). Giddens refers to these places as 'locales', which he defines as 'settings of time-space paths through which individuals move' (Giddens 1984:367). People do not act in such 'locales' just as individuals per se, but also towards others, and they are in turn acted upon by others. In other words interaction between people takes place in these 'locales'. People's behaviour towards each other, their bodily conduct and the bodily spaces they occupy will depend on the type of 'locale' or space they find themselves in and also on the individual's gender. Iris Young (1989), for example, points out that women use only part of the body when engaged in an action, whereas men have the tendency to stretch their bodies and invade surrounding space. Furthermore she argues that there are differences between feminine and masculine experiences of space, where women have been more oriented towards 'enclosed' spaces and men towards 'open' spaces.

An outstanding contribution to a better understanding of people's behaviour patterns and interaction practices in public spaces comes from the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1963). His work on interaction, institutions and the 'positioning of the body in social encounters' plays a significant part in Giddens's structuration theory. Goffman's starting point for analysis is not the individual agent, but different forms of interaction between people. Interaction, in terms of face-to-face interaction is defined by Goffman (1959:26) as

... the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence.

He distinguishes between different types of interactional occasions. 'Focused gatherings', for example, require the focused attention of the participants (e.g. people engaged in conversation, dancing couples, pairs of co-operating workers), whereas 'unfocused gatherings' have not such a focus and can be, for example, the situation of pedestrians meeting in the street (Kendon 1988). However,
according to Goffman, even in unfocused encounters like street encounters, certain ‘traffic rules’ of non-verbal face-to-face interaction take place (people glancing at each other, acknowledging each other’s physical presence whilst passing each other).

Goffman’s most telling contributions to understanding the sustaining and reproduction of encounters are to do with the relation between the reflexive control of the body - that is to say, the reflexive self-monitoring of gesture, bodily movement and posture - and the mutual co-ordination of interaction ... (Giddens 1984:78).

This reflexive monitoring of action demands the ‘exhibiting of presence’ (Goffman 1963). In other words awareness of how one dresses, moves and appears in public. People manage their bodies according to the spaces they move in. Hence women in Bangladesh, for example, will apply different ‘body techniques’ if at home, within the surveillance of the village community, within an enclosed organisation, whilst performing paid work or walking in the streets. ‘Body techniques’ as defined by Mauss (1973:271) are

... the ways in which from society to society men (sic) know how to use their bodies ...

According to Mauss, biological, sociological and psychological factors play a role in people’s acquisition of body techniques. These techniques are ‘technical’, ‘traditional’ and ‘efficient’ actions, because they are ‘constituted by a specific set of movements or form; they are acquired by means of training or education; and they serve a definite purpose or function’ (Crossley 1995:134). Mauss refers to people imitating actions successfully performed by others they trust and/or who have authority over them. This approach, however needed to be extended as it failed:

to consider the extent to which the exercise of body techniques ... can be deemed social action ... there is no account of how they [Mauss’s agents] ... transform it [tradition] into the vibrant flux of everyday social interaction, how tradition becomes competence, know-how and action (Crossley 1995:135).

In the context of women in Bangladesh the question then is: how do women’s culturally-acquired body techniques transform into social action? How does everyday social interaction either in ‘focused encounters’ in a development agency or in ‘unfocused encounters’ in the streets influence and transform women’s body techniques? Goffman’s link between embodied action and people’s perception of
their social surroundings is useful here. Whereas Mauss’s body techniques explain the different walking styles people might apply in the street, Goffman’s approach also refers to people’s ‘understanding of the (social) situational accommodation which any average stroll entails’ (Crossley 1995:136).

[Goffman] is not only concerned with what is done to the body in the context of the social world, the ways in which it is acted upon and represented, he is concerned with what the body does in the social world, how it works to construct and reproduce that world, how it acts. The body acts and is acted upon for Goffman. It sees and is seen, speaks and is spoken to and about (Crossley 1995:148).

2.7 Women’s lived and embodied experiences of empowerment

How do these theoretical insights translate into a practical research agenda? I would argue that empowerment is a process influencing and reshaping women’s lives and that NGOs like GK, which provides the organisational framework for my case study of women’s empowerment, are examples of ‘locales’ where empowerment practices are likely to take place. The ‘locale’ GK can be an enabling structure in terms of providing women with income, skills, literacy, information and space to interact with others. However, it can also be constraining through its different rules and regulations. In fact questions are being raised about the extent to which NGOs in Bangladesh are patronising people and interfering in their private lives (Devine 1996, White 1992b, Wood 1994b). This, of course, is tied into the way wider social structures function in Bangladesh. Village life, for example, can be very restrictive for women: limiting women’s mobility, controlling access to education and expecting particular behavioral codes from women. At the same time these structures can also be enabling in terms of offering a familiar surrounding, kinship networks and protection. While accepting Giddens’s general framework depicting the relationship between structure and agency, I am particularly interested in the process of agency. I want to concentrate on what women actually do within given structures, what they make out of an organisation like GK, how they use the enabling resources for themselves, how they act within given constraining structures and how women themselves experience change. I investigate whether, and if so, how, the experience of leaving their homes, becoming involved in GK
and interacting with others transforms women into embodied social agents of change. Do these experiences affect women's self-perception? Do they have an impact on the way women relate to other people, in particular men? Do they encourage women to form potential new alliances, which might eventually lead towards political action? In short, my focus is on women's lived experiences of empowerment.

Although the empowerment literature claims to perceive empowerment as a process (see p. 29) I would argue that it lacks an in-depth analysis of how this process evolves. The process is described in theoretical terms and not in practical ones. It highlights various steps, stages or points within the process of empowerment (individual awareness, collective consciousness, collective action), but fails to capture the flow of this process. It does not elaborate adequately on how these stages are linked to each other. In other words it lacks a deeper understanding of how women become empowered and what this means to them. How do women move from one position to the other within the empowerment process? What are they experiencing during the 'in-between' phases? The literature places selected steps on an 'empowerment continuum' (Shetty 1991:13), where the final step is usually that of 'collective action'. This 'collective action' can supposedly be 'facilitated' through NGO intervention, but how do women experience this 'facilitation'? How do women experience empowerment? General development and empowerment theories do not say enough about how empowerment affects women's day to day lives. On the contrary, much of the existing literature still concentrates on the causes of women's disempowerment and therefore centres its main questions around how and with the help of whom these can be overcome.

However, an overemphasis on oppression or 'powerlessness' runs the risk of objectifying women as passive victims:

Women have been brought up in fear of their men, their employers, and their communities. They live in constant fear of losing their livelihoods, of starvation, of losing their children to illness and of being thrown out of their houses. Traditional attitudes towards women, which result in a lack of mobility, a lack of value of women's worth, and a position of deference to male opinions, compound this problem. All of this leads to a sense of helplessness among women (Carr et al. 1996:195).
The term 'powerless' is particularly unsatisfactory in this context as it leaves the impression of weak, vulnerable and helpless women. By using such a static and rigid term one seems to deny the fact that women have any power at all. The word ignores subtle forms, degrees and variations of power women might exert, for example, in their household affairs or in their sexual behaviour. It ignores the possibilities of women covertly resisting such as secret borrowing of money, hiding money, not telling their husbands about extra payments or withholding sex.

Wood (1992) speaks of a paradox in the way Bangladeshi women’s subordination has been portrayed in the literature compared with the realities of women’s increased participation in social action over the last twenty years.

While not wishing to deny the systematic disadvantages which face women, especially rural and poor, this paradox arises from the way the initial questions are asked about women. Much commentary proceeds from the question 'How are women constrained?' instead of asking 'What do women do?' The first treats women, a priori, as passive (intransitive); the second as active (transitive) (Wood 1992:13).

In order to get closer to women’s daily realities a more refined and in-depth understanding of women’s micro-level experiences with patriarchy, dependency, gender divisions of labour, exploitation and seclusion is needed. How do such general terms translate into women’s day to day lives? What does an abstract term such as seclusion, for example, mean to women? How do women describe a secluded life? In which situations do they feel secluded and why? How do women reflect on seclusion after they have come out of it? How then would they look back at their own histories of oppression? In cases where women have managed to distance themselves from certain oppressive structures (spatially and/or temporarily), how would these women describe such changes in their lives?

Like Rowlands (1997) - one of the few who combines a thorough theoretical discussion of empowerment with its practical implications in her work on women’s empowerment in Honduras - I am interested in highlighting women’s experiences of empowerment in the context of Bangladesh. My approach towards
empowerment places women's perspective at the core of the analysis. However, the literature that goes beyond abstract theorising and the stress on 'structure' (see above) still fails to incorporate women's own perspectives adequately. There is a plethora of case studies of empowerment projects in Bangladesh. They are indeed practice-oriented, but generally tend to focus on the performance of the NGO examined. One can notice this tendency in some of their titles: 'In quest of empowerment: the Grameen Bank's impact on women's power and status', 'Breaking the cycle of poverty: the Brac strategy', 'Managing to empower: the Grameen Bank's experience of poverty alleviation', 'Transforming women's economies: Brac', 'The impact of Grameen Bank on the situation of poor rural women' etc. Such research provides an organisational outlook and a list of potential NGO strategies for empowerment, but fails to capture the micro-perspectives of the women involved in these organisations. In other words the unit of analysis is the NGO - as the benevolent facilitator of empowerment - not the individual woman. What has been written about the experiences of NGOs in South Asia tends to 'put forward the voice of the people running the NGO, rather than the voice of the women who are the intended beneficiaries of their programmes' (Carr et al. 1996:8). Even Batliwala's (1993, 1994) and Bhasin's (1985) excellent work on women's empowerment arises from workshops with NGO leaders and not women participants. Along similar lines Young (1993:162-163) advises macro-level policy makers to 'consult' people about development goals and necessary resources, but refers to NGOs as the 'consultative bodies or councils', rather than the women themselves.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the academic literature on empowerment. The feminist empowerment literature highlights in particular women's 'confidence in themselves [and] their personal and collective abilities to exercise power within existing structural and institutional constraints' (Nelson and Wright 1995:17). There is much talk, however, of awareness and consciousness raising and the understanding of gender and class issues, which sometimes runs the risk of remaining at a rather abstract level. Insufficient attention is paid to how people involved in the process of empowerment themselves perceive their
own changes. Their lived and embodied experiences of empowerment are lacking in the current debate. In order to demonstrate the importance of including these experiences in the empowerment literature I chose to study women's daily empowerment practices in the NGO GK. I lived in the premises of the organisation and selected thirty women involved there for my core interviews.

My contribution to the empowerment discourse aims to deconstruct the abstract theoretical level of empowerment into the everyday lived experiences of empowerment of women in the Bangladesh context. This has had an influence on both the subject of my research as well as the methodology I decided to apply (see next chapter). My approach is holistic in that it touches on various levels of empowerment: economic, socio-political and bodily aspects of empowerment.

Notes

1. On the WID movement see, for example, Buvinic (1983), Rogers (1980), Tinker (1990).


7. The three approaches are referred to as the WID approaches. The equity approach is the original WID approach and aims to reduce the inequality between men and women through top-down intervention. The anti-poverty approach has softened these demands. It only aims to reduce income inequality by focusing on women's productive role. The efficiency approach relies on women being entirely responsible for effective and efficient projects in the context of declining social services. For more details see Goetz (1991) and Moser (1993).


9. Antrobus (1989:189) speaks of 'power for' or 'personal power' and defines it as coming 'from within each person'. She refers to a person's 'maturity, sense of self, lack of need to gain from others, and belief in her or his motives'.


11. See also Freire (1972) and Staudt (1990).
12. I find the term 'continuum' slightly misleading, as it seems to imply that change moves in a particular direction, whereas I understand empowerment as a dynamic, non-linear process.

13. The South Asian workshop was organised in 1991 by the Food and Agriculture Organisation/ Freedom From Hunger Campaign (FAO/FFHC) - Action for Development and an earlier FAO workshop with a similar agenda was held in 1985.

14. Empowerment is not a directly measurable variable. It is instead measured by proxy indicators such as health, education level, or knowledge (Ackerly 1995).

15. I understand 'tradition' is a problematic term. Here I am applying it as used by Rogers (1980). Rogers refers to the international development agencies' promotion of development projects for women. Handicrafts programmes are described as 'traditional' projects.

16. On difference see, for example, Barrett 1987 and Irigaray 1985.

17. A lot of the literature on household decision-making was located within the area of family sociology/family studies. Therefore many of the articles can be found in journals such as Journal of Marriage and Family or Journal of Comparative Family Studies (see Mizan 1994, Chapter Three).

18. Khas land (government land) was promised to the landless people free of cost shortly after the independence of Bangladesh. This land distribution has proven to be far more difficult than expected as powerful groups tend to claim the land for themselves.

19. Shalishes are village arbitration councils. They are made up of village elders, influential villagers and the village clergy (usually only men). No legislation governs the shalish and therefore the power given to it by the villagers is often misused.

Chapter Three: Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

The dominant view of Bangladeshi women to emerge out of the works of Western authors stresses the primacy of rural women who are projected as skilled, hardworking, contributory but ultimately weak and pitiable (Alam and Matin 1984:5-6).

The rationale behind my methodology lies in my desire to contribute to recent feminist literature that has been challenging existing notions of victimisation, powerlessness and invisibility of women in Islamic societies.¹ My fieldwork aimed to capture women’s ‘lived experiences’ since leaving behind their familiar worlds of ‘home’ and ‘village community’ and entering a new work and social environment in an organisation such as GK. In tracing back women’s memories of their former lifestyles in the villages, I tried to map their histories and experiences of change within a place and time framework. I sought to understand women’s ‘lived experience’ in the process of empowerment and their perceptions of the change they went through. I decided to use predominantly qualitative methods. This chapter explores the reasoning behind my choice of methodology.

I first describe the stages of development in the research design which underwent shifts from initial exploratory ideas to a more refined final structure as the study progressed. In this ongoing process of reflection on my own preconceptions and biases leading to various phases of revision, amendments and reshaping of thoughts and concepts I settled on the case study organisation Gonoshasthaya Kendra as my research ‘site’ and feminist ethnography as my main research method. I will illustrate my preconceptions by pointing out prefixed definitions I had carried with me to the ‘field’ and how meanings attached to them in theoretical academic discourses needed to be revised in the specific local context. The practical side of my fieldwork is described next in terms of research strategy, techniques and analysis. I conclude with some final thoughts on research ethics and my position as a researcher.
3.2 Finding a ‘site’

My initial research plans that I formulated in England were based on broad concepts of changes in women’s lives in Bangladesh set within the background of a growing NGO community. After the typical beginner’s familiarisation with the existing literature I toyed with the idea of finding gender-sensitive development organisations that had adopted innovative approaches going beyond standard ‘income generation projects’. I was looking for NGOs that address both women’s ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ gender needs; NGOs that possessed ‘transformatory potential’ (see Chapter Two): in other words NGOs that would have a lasting impact on women’s lives. In a brief exploratory visit to Bangladesh in the winter of 1992/1993, in which I tried to identify potential case study organisations amongst the mushrooming NGO community in Bangladesh, I came across a few interesting development projects that had alternative agendas to the standard handicrafts programmes. During this period I built on existing contacts with researchers at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), which helped me link up with indigenous development organisations, key activists in the women’s movement, members of the Planning Commission and academics related to my field. After reflecting on the multifarious advice people gave me on choosing a research topic that would not only be viable as a doctoral thesis but also contribute useful practical insights to the development community, I was drawn to two organisations: GK and Ubinig, both of them very well-known NGOs, but neither as widely documented as, for example, BRAC or Grameen Bank. I was deeply impressed by both organisations’ innovative programmes and dedication to their empowerment approaches. GK was one of the pioneers in training rural landless women in non-traditional fields, whereas Ubinig launched the first and only feminist bookstore in Bangladesh attracting mainly urban middle class women as its clientele. I was tempted to compare the experiences of the rural women working and interacting with each other in GK with their middle class urban ‘sisters’ who met regularly in Ubinig’s ‘adda’ sessions to exchange their thoughts. I soon discarded this idea, however, realising that given the complexities of both organisations and the different motivations of the women involved in their programmes each project would merit a detailed study of its own. I decided to drop the idea of comparing organisations altogether and narrowed down my approach by opting for an intense and
thorough study of just one particular programme of GK. I decided to concentrate on the organisation's vocational training centre for rural landless women: Nari Kendra.

My original fascination with GK was a product of the fact that it offered women training in 'non-traditional' fields. My understanding of the term 'non-traditional', however, was influenced by the dominant western literature on women and work and by NGO recommendations. That is 'where [my] ideas came from' (Bogan and Biklen 1992:88) and where my initial research design had its theoretical foundations.

The training of women in areas traditionally identified as men's work may not only widen employment opportunities for women, but may also break down existing occupational segregation, thereby fulfilling the strategic gender need to abolish the sexual division of labour. Women's training in house building skills such as masonry and carpentry provides one such example (Moser 1991:92).

The literature equates 'non-traditional' work with the acquisition of skills predominantly occupied by men, the ability to earn more than those engaged in traditional work and the ability to contribute to challenging gender stereotypes in the labour market.

As discussed in Chapter Two, I felt GK exemplified an alternative to the standard handicrafts approaches by combining 'practical' and 'strategic' gender needs and interests, where its 'non-traditional income generation activities' were clearly part of the underlying strategic element.

3.3 Finding a methodology

Once I had arrived in GK my first impressions, however, were of slight disappointment. It did not quite fit my theoretical assumptions of an organisation dealing with women's 'strategic' interests. I did not immediately find what I was expecting: a well structured awareness-raising programme, where gender and class issues were raised on a regular basis, complementing the 'non-traditional' skills training. It appeared to me as if the organisation's meetings, where all staff and workers participate, had shifted the emphasis towards
production issues. I therefore assumed that the awareness-raising side of GK's approach had become stagnant over the years.

What materialised after repeated reading of the first interview material and preliminary analysis was, however, that in reality both women's economic independence as well as GK's less tangible 'awareness' or rather 'providing space for learning' approach had left a strong impact on the women. I realised that I would have to alter my initial expectations and look for the subtleties within women's process of change, if I wanted to understand the complexity of this process. To grasp these subtle changes I needed to intensify my research strategy and concentrate on the women involved in the project.

From the original formulation of my research question: *Is GK changing the women's lives?* I shifted the emphasis to: *How are the lives of women involved in GK changing?* I discarded the former way of phrasing the question as it centred around GK as the subject of research, pinpointing the research towards that of a project evaluation. Positioning GK as the benevolent organisation supposedly bestowing power upon women resembled in a way the top-down approaches of the international aid agencies. The latter formulation, on the other hand, had the potential to release a variety of possible explanations for women's changes. Their lives could be changing, for example, either through GK as a vehicle and/or due to their own personalities and strengths and/or their relationships at GK and/or other forces I had not even taken into consideration before (e.g. general socio-economic trends in the country). The latter formulation shifted the focus from the organisation towards understanding processes of change from the women's point of view. What became crucial to my investigation therefore were the women involved in the project and not so much the project itself. Rather than evaluating a project and looking for measurable 'hard data' this approach understood the organisation GK as the 'site', as the empirical framework on which to 'hang' life-histories of individual women. Instead of (mis)-representing 'figures of Third World women' as 'privileged loci of knowledge' (Radcliffe 1994:26) this approach enabled me to listen to the women's stories: for example, how they managed to become more confident, how they escaped oppressive situations in their former life and how their lifestyles, attitudes, feelings and behaviour had changed over time.

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White claims the dominant literature had given her ‘no idea of how it felt to be a woman in Bangladesh’ and that:

... virtually every text on women in Bangladesh has been funded by foreign aid ... The stress of the literature is positivist, rather than hermeneutic; most aspire to science, rather than art. In general the thrust has been to develop more systematic techniques, rather than to produce sharper analysis. The primary concern is to quantify what is observed ... it means a significant sacrifice of sensitivity to the multiplicity of forms of identity and power relations that gender can express. In aiming to address specific debates studies bracket off a whole range of other social and cultural factors (White 1992:16-17).

White’s critique of the dominant development discourse in Bangladesh reinforced my decision to focus on individual women’s stories rather than add to the plethora of ‘project evaluation’ studies within the GAD context.

Recent debates on methodology have focused on the quantitative-qualitative divide, where some would argue for segregating the two approaches and others suggest a combination. Hammersley (1992:7-8) reasons ‘that the choice of one or the other of these strategies involves trade-offs whose significance must be judged in terms of the purposes and circumstances of particular studies’. I decided to focus on feminist ethnography as it served my particular purposes best especially as regards the understanding of women’s attitudinal and behavioral changes. My methodology, therefore, took the shape of gathering ‘thick’ ethnographic data (Hammersley 1992:12) i.e. ‘detailed accounts of the concrete experience of life within a particular culture’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:10) through verbatim interviews in order to be able to encapsulate the richness of women’s perceptions, feelings and experiences of change. I needed to get a feeling of what it is like to be in GK. (I will speak of GK and its approach to women’s empowerment in more detail in my next chapter.) I did not entirely dismiss quantitative methods, however, and built on them as an additional source of information whenever appropriate. I thus complimented the in-depth interviews and life histories of a selected group of women with a questionnaire survey that was undertaken on a broader level, which yielded a general profile of the women involved at the organisation.

When choosing feminist ethnography as my core method I was also drawing from
the feminist grassroots approaches in their critique of mainstream development discourse (Batliwala 1993, Hashemi and Schuler 1993, Kabeer 1994, Sen and Grown 1987). Even in the empowerment literature the focus has, however, been more on theory-building rather than on understanding practice (see Chapter Two). Models or proxy indicators for measuring empowerment are developed. Empowerment has become a buzzword in development debates, and people try to explain what it is or rather what it is supposed to be. As indicated in Chapter Two there is a lot of talk about strategies of empowerment, but not enough work is done on the practice of empowerment as lived by people at the 'grassroots'. In order to facilitate an empowerment process one needs to understand how such a process takes place in practice. To understand that one needs first to understand the life circumstances of the people who are supposed to become empowered. Even Batliwala's (1993, 1994) detailed insights on empowerment are based on the experiences of intermediaries i.e. the NGOs and not the women themselves.

There is obviously a gap in the development and empowerment literature that makes it all the more important to start to listen to so-called 'target groups', the 'Others', those who are supposed to become 'more developed'/'more empowered'. It is time to let these 'target mummies' come alive. How can development planners design appropriate aid programmes without recognising people's genuine needs and interests? Before implementing a project that has, for example, the intention of helping women empower themselves, one needs to be aware of the context in which the process of change is supposed to take place. In other words, one needs to 'get an idea of how it feels like to be a woman in Bangladesh'. Rather than claiming to create knowledge such an approach attempts to create situated understanding (Thrift 1996): in this case a better understanding of the factors that have an influence on women's lives in Bangladesh i.e. those that facilitate and those that hinder women's empowerment. It will show which issues are of relevance to the women themselves. As Kabeer (1994:300) argues, women need to be perceived as 'actors competent to interpret their own needs' rather than mere 'passive recipients'.

The experiences of other feminists doing research on rural women in Bangladesh, where conventional text book techniques were regarded as inadequate in
reaching women in that particular field situation, inspired me in my choice of feminist ethnography. Westergaard, for example, could not obtain appropriate attitudinal data through traditional research methods and recommended informal discussion and case histories. She argues:

... if we want to advance further - and want to make our research relevant to improving the situation of rural women - we need to have a better understanding of their own perception of their own lives. I would, therefore, suggest that future research on rural women in Bangladesh should focus on in-depth studies (Westergaard 1982:53).

In Shamima Islam’s (1982) collection of research experiences of people working on rural women in Bangladesh, the authors’ backgrounds were as divergent as, for example, Bangladeshi and Western anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, consultants and activists. Some of the suggestions made there were for example, having ‘intimate discussion rounds’ with rural women, letting the researcher be ‘identified as a person’, ‘stretch[ing] conventional do’s and don’ts’ and creating rapport by using non-traditional strategies such as ‘participating in gossip sessions’. Abdullah (1982) discussed general topics with the women before moving on towards more specific topics in ‘free flow discussion sessions’ where women spoke about the ‘details of their lives’. This approach is obviously very time-consuming. McCarthy (1982) demands that the researcher should ‘respond to them [the researched] in culturally suited ways’, in other words ‘to blend in with the local environment’. As Islam S. suggests:

... creating rapport with one’s study group is vital for field research and needless to say, it is extremely time-consuming. It can hardly be accommodated within broad-based surveys. In-depth micro-studies are, therefore, extremely important; they are able to generate quality data which is so very essential for development purposes (Islam 1982:15-16).

Conventional social science and research methods have been under siege from various camps (feminist, postmodern, post-colonial, critical theory), who were particularly critical of the implied eurocentricity, hierarchical and ‘androcentric’ approach and distance from practice. Using an alternative method such as feminist ethnography is one way of taking into account these existing critiques. Instead of treating the ‘Others’ as ‘passive respondents’ and demanding that the supposedly detached interviewer be aware of the dangers of ‘overrapport’ or ‘going native’ feminist ethnography focuses
... on interpretation, relies on the researcher’s immersion in social settings, and aims for intersubjective understanding between researchers and the person(s) studied (Reinharz 1992:46).

Instead of ‘being friendly and interested’, ‘pleasant, but business-like’ and certainly not ‘too emotionally involved with the respondent and his problems’ (Moser 1958 cited in Oakley 1981:34) feminists argue that ‘personal involvement’ is ‘the condition under which people come to know each other and ... admit others into their lives’ (Oakley 1981:58). According to Finch (1984:87) feminists are ‘likely to produce more scholarly and more incisive sociology’ when not being ‘defensive’ about their political commitment to their work, which is confirmed by Bologh:

[T]he activity of uncovering, revealing, and demanding recognition of that which is being repressed by a given discourse or form of life is simultaneously political and intellectual, practical and theoretical, empowering and illuminating. And this, precisely, represents feminism’s most important contribution to social theory (Bologh 1991:38).

Feminist ethnography itself (or the relationship between feminism and ethnography), however, is not free from biases.

Boas insisted that if anthropologists looked at other cultures with the concepts, categories, and biases of Western culture - that is, with their own Kulturbrillen - they would see nothing but distortion (Wax 1971:30).

Reiter (1975 in Westergaard 1982) translates Boases Kulturbrillen into ‘blinders of our own civilisation when approaching other cultures’. According to her ‘our eyes are as conditioned as those of the people we study’. Clearly we are all loaded with preconceptions and biases due to our positions in society, gender, upbringing, religious beliefs, social and ethical backgrounds and political ideology (Bogan and Biklen 1992). Although I might look like a Bangladeshi and have Bangladeshi blood in me, I am nevertheless tainted with or blinded by Western Christian cultural values. As with Rowlands (1995) concept of ‘internalised oppression’, whereby part of the empowerment process entails overcoming the internalised oppressive values of one’s own culture, we can apply this to ourselves by acknowledging the fact that there are bound to be grey areas of our consciousness that we have not dealt with yet. In that sense it will never be possible to ‘look at other cultures’ in a pure, innocent and uncontaminated way. Postmodern and critical ethnographers have added to the debate, criticising
inherent power relations within traditional ethnography and arguing for more ‘action oriented research’. One way of dealing with this problem is simply to be honest about it by acknowledging our own ignorance, whenever we become aware of it i.e. ‘taking into account who [we] are’, ‘how [we] think’ and ‘where [our] ideas come from’ (Bogan and Biklen 1992:88). At the same time we have to acknowledge the limitations of ethnography, in particular feminist ethnography, and be prepared to reduce its claims to knowledge by recognising the partiality and situatedness of its truths (Clifford 1986, Haraway 1988, Rose 1997, Stacey 1991, Staeheli and Lawson 1994).

Recent feminist ethnography® has begun to reveal the author and her/his role in constructing accounts by confronting and incorporating debates on positionality, reflexivity and representation. In its aim to overcome the hierarchical and exploitative relations of conventional methods, feminist ethnography strives for ‘authenticity, reciprocity and intersubjectivity’ between the researcher and her/his ‘subjects’, where the ‘subjects’ are perceived as ‘collaborators’ in feminist research (Stacey 1991:112). The limitations within feminist ethnography, however, lie in the potentiality of ‘manipulation’ and ‘betrayal’ by the researcher and the fact, that at the end of the day the ‘lived experiences’ of the researched remain the researcher’s ‘data’ (Stacey 1991:113). It is the researcher, who has the ‘final power of interpretation’ (Gilbert 1994:94) and ‘who ultimately chooses which quotes (and, therefore, whose "voices") to include’ (England 1994:86). Feminist ethnography’s claim of collaboration between researcher and researched is therefore only of a temporary nature as the actual research ‘product’ tends to remain entirely that of the researcher, who ‘authors’ the ethnography (Stacey 1991:114).

Also the term ‘participant observation’ is in itself ambiguous, as it involves immersion, closeness and ‘sympathetic understanding’ of the subjects’ problems on the one hand (participation), and objective, neutral distance (observation) on the other (Cook and Crang 1995, England 1994, Reinharz 1992, Rizvi 1982, Rose 1997, Stacey 1991, White 1992). Feminist geographers point out the paradoxical ‘position’ they therefore find themselves in: not wanting to be different to the researched, but realising the impossibility of sameness. England (1994), Katz (1994), Kobayashi (1994) and Nast (1994) have therefore described the feminist
researcher's position as that of a 'betweeness' in relation to the 'field' and 'not-field', theory and practice and researcher and researched, where 'betweeness' implies that 'we are never "outsiders" or "insiders" in any absolute sense' (Nast 1994:57).7

Post-colonial critique towards western feminist scholarship challenged the notion of universal sisterhood, which was based on the assumption that the mere fact of being a woman implied having an 'insider' status, which automatically made you a 'sister'. Inherent power relations between first and third world women were emphasised and the way third world women had been used as 'native informants' (Spivak 1988), finding a voice only as the colonised objectified 'Other' (Abu-Lughod 1991, Minh-ha 1989, Mohanty 1991, Ong 1988). Issues of representation and authenticity were heavily debated leading to the question of 'who should speak for whom?'

Spivak (1988), for example, raised the question whether the subalterns can speak i.e. 'be heard by the privileged of either the First or Third Worlds' (Landry and Maclean 1996:5) and argued that they would cease to be subalterns once they managed to be heard. Spivak does not believe in change through 'the radical critic' (Spivak 1990) speaking for them nor through her/him 'pretending merely to let them speak for themselves' (Landry and Maclean 1996:6).8 Others have claimed for an authenticity, where only 'insiders' should have the right to represent. '[O]nly a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture ...' (Suleri 1995:275 referring to the post-colonial critiques' claim to authenticity). Who are, however, the most authentic 'insiders' and how can one guarantee that they really have the 'authentic experience'?

I take on board warnings within the post-colonial discourse of not falling into the trap of trying to universalise and homogenise feminism without acknowledging different realities and agendas cross-culturally. What is perceived to be 'oppressive' here/first world/for western women might be 'liberating' there/third world/for non-western women and what is perceived to be 'empowering' and 'resistant' here might be 'colonising' and 'reactionary' there (Bhachu 1985:45, Simon and Brettell 1986, Spivak 1985:1868). The post-colonialist's claim for

We cannot replace the question 'What must be done?' with 'Who am I?', or with the retreating statement 'I cannot claim to know, and so can do nothing' (Goetz 1991:134).

It has been proposed to move beyond this division through coalition politics which build upon the 'strength in numbers' and place 'in the foreground those locations from which we claim to know' (Goetz 1991:150-151). Goetz demands a 'more rigorously materialist analysis' (Goetz 1991:151) in order to be able to differentiate the various sites of oppression (class, race, gender) and their interconnections. And according to Ware,

White and black women can unite ... against the combination of gender, class and race relations that forbids cultural differences and fears that the dominant culture will be "swamped" by an Other one (Ware 1992:253).

Others argue for a reflexive analysis, which aims to 'break down hierarchical objectivistic ways of knowing' (Nast 1994:58) and which seeks to 'transform the structures that create "our" privilege and "their" marginalisation' (Staeheli and Lawson 1994:97). Kobayashi (1994:76) suggests not to ask 'whether our position of power and authority denies us the right to conduct research but, rather, how we use our privilege to social ends'. Some feminists applied 'democratisation' practices within their research such as giving editorial power to the researched or presenting the research to them (Gilbert 1994).

One needs to recognise, however, that not only the relationship between researcher and researched have an effect on the written text and its representation, but also the 'audiences' (Keith 1992) and 'institutional frameworks' (Nast 1994) involved in that process. Audiences with an influence on my written text are therefore not only academic, but, for example,
governmental and non-governmental organisations, activists, political elites and the donor community. Staeheli and Lawson's (1994:101) suggestion of making research more 'accessible' and 'useful' can therefore be interpreted in terms of addressing various audiences in different ways.

3.4 The research strategy in practice

Once I had decided to take GK as my case study organisation, I talked my research plans over with the director, who then offered to rent a room to me so that I could live within the project amongst the women. GK staff did not interfere in any way in my research and treated me without any special privileges. The living conditions in GK were almost spartan: small room with a bed, a wardrobe, a sink, a toilet, a table and a chair and probably one of the most cherished luxury items i.e. a fan. I suppose one of the privileges I did have was a room to myself unlike the others who all shared rooms. This, however, did not mean that I had my privacy. The first month was actually quite exhausting, because people were so curious about me that my room turned into the centrepoint of attraction and I found myself sometimes wishing I could have been given a quieter room. I felt overwhelmed with the new situation and the immense curiosity I encountered and which I had not expected at that level. At times I felt helpless and handicapped as I could not communicate well enough with them nor join in the women's giggles. I felt like an 'outsider' in an enclosed place where my immediate surroundings were unfamiliar and only a few people could communicate with me in my own language. I felt alone in the yet unknown GK community when I started with the field observation. The term 'participant observer' did not apply to me in the classic sense as I did not engage in the work activities at GK. I had various reasons not to do so. One reason not to join in the daily agricultural ritual at 5am in the morning, for example, was pure laziness. I pretended not to hear the loud bell that called everyone - workers, doctors, staff alike - to participate in the agricultural fieldwork, convincing myself that I would be more in the way than actually contributing to effective work. It would have been similarly pointless to pretend to be one of the workers and start appearing in work uniforms armed with a hammer to start the day with the carpenters.
Where I did participate wholeheartedly was in 'GK life'. I lived in GK for seven continuous months during my first field-trip in 1994/5 and joined in the daily and social life of GK women. I also participated in official functions, meetings and political demonstrations such as the International Women's Day or Independence Day. I was trying to live as an 'insider' as far as possible *i.e.* eat the same food, live in the same housing conditions, see the same environment every day, encounter the same people; but was nevertheless aware of participating as an 'outsider' who at the end of the day only held a guestlike status. In other words, I was moving 'inbetween' the positions of an insider and outsider.

In the floor underneath my room was the general canteen, where workers, unmarried staff and doctors would eat. I remember clearly those first days when I walked into the canteen to have my meal how every single person present focused on me. I felt their gazes on me, I heard them giggle about me, point at me and whisper about this strange newcomer, the *bideshi* woman. In those moments of complete self-consciousness the insiders took on the roles of observers and I was the observed. One of the key moments and turning points during my assimilation time at GK was a simple gesture by one of the younger women. It was again in the canteen, where I must have made quite a fool of myself when trying to copy them in eating fish using only the left hand. I was close to giving up, when a young woman next to me asked me if I would mind her helping me. I was deeply touched at this simple, yet so genuine gesture of help. The canteen scene, that I still have imprinted in my mind until today, was her preparing the fish for me so that I could have readily edible pieces on my plate. Everybody was giggling, but this time I felt less embarrassed about it, and interpreted it as a gesture of welcoming me to the GK community and accepting my difference.

After an initial 'warming up' phase in GK - a familiarisation with the people living in GK and the place itself - I began the actual interviewing. I had taken basic Bengali lessons in London as well as in Dhaka, but like any other Western researcher coming to Bangladesh I needed the help of translators. The choice of the right translator turned out to be quite a challenge, which I will come back to in more detail later. Given the fact that I was working through an intermediate voice and not having direct communication with the women, I chose
to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews. I had prepared a checklist in
London with the major themes and questions that I wanted to cover (see
Appendix Two). Once in the field I undertook short pilot interviews to get an idea
of the women's background, which helped me observe how the women reacted to
this interview situation and gave them a chance to get used to me and my
interest in them. I told them I was writing a book about them. It was fascinating
to notice that they appeared equally interested in me. I never imagined them to
be as open and chatty as they turned out to be. I knew they were more exposed
to foreigners than women in the villages, but I was still surprised at how easy
and comfortable most of the interviews felt. In London I had been preoccupied
about what to do when the interview loses its flow and you get those awkward
silences, but when sitting with the GK women the contrary happened most of the
time. Once the conversation was going they chatted away without any problems
and often my tape would run out before the conversation had come to a natural
end.

My core interviews consisted of thirty women of whom the majority were
currently engaged in GK. Some had left GK and were now either working
elsewhere or had stopped working for money. Approximately half of the women
lived within the GK campus and the others commuted to GK from their villages.
I covered all the departments within the vocational training centre. Some women
were long term employees and others still trainees. My selection criteria also
considered women's age and time spent in GK and their marital status.

I had already started arrangements to find a translator back home, where one
of my friends mentioned his sister Moni, who was eager and interested to help
me. When I met her in Bangladesh we became friends instantly. She was
strikingly intelligent and open-minded and always keen to learn new things. Her
family supported me throughout my entire stay and treated me like one of theirs.
They came from a lower-middle class background and happened to live quite
close to GK. Their house was always open to me, which was wonderful as I had
a welcoming 'family' to turn to whenever I felt lonely. At the same time it gave
me my first insights into typical family life in Bangladesh.

As Moni was quite young (18), unmarried and still went to college, she had to be
home before dark.\textsuperscript{14} We therefore had to conduct the interviews during working hours. This meant that I had to organise most of the interviews around the women's working schedules. It also meant I had to be flexible and find the right moments to start an interview and be prepared to postpone it again if the women were too busy. Most of the interviews took place close to the work place, maybe a few metres away from where the other women were hammering, with little space for privacy. I usually sat outside in the boiling sun with plenty of distraction ranging from the occasional passer-by making comments, to loud machines or other annoying work noise, and to sudden outbursts of rain. Sometimes I was lucky and could convince Moni's parents to let her stay overnight at GK with me as her chaperon. Then we would do the interviewing in the women's rooms in their leisure time or occasionally I managed to 'lure' some of them to my room in the lunch break. In general, however, interviewing took place in a noisy and distracting atmosphere. On the other hand, being so close to their work place whilst being engaged in doing my own work, was a legitimate way of observing the women at work. My daily presence at the workshops had quickly become accepted as part of my work.

Moni's carefree personality helped enormously in establishing the initial rapport with the women at GK. She would start the conversations very smoothly and the women felt relaxed and comfortable with her. I noticed quickly how much I valued her communicatory strengths when I was forced to work with someone else for some time while Moni was busy with her exams. Sabina, a master's student from Dhaka, who was also involved in research on women, was recommended to me by someone at BIDS. Unfortunately, however, she just did not click with the women in the same down-to-earth way as Moni did.\textsuperscript{15} Sabina's family was richer than Moni's and quite urbanite. Although she was older than Moni, Sabina led a more protected and sheltered life. She was, for example, dropped off and picked up by her family's driver in their car every day, whereas Moni got used to travelling alone in the bus rather quickly after I assured her that she would be fine. Sabina did not seem suited for the simplicity of the GK lifestyle.\textsuperscript{16} I realised what an important role the right choice of assistants and their intuition and ability to communicate with village women played for the overall research.
As Moni got busier with her exams, however, and I became aware of the fact that I needed someone with better English skills for the more complex and sophisticated interviews, I began to work with two of my male university friends, Jamal and Monju. I was initially a bit apprehensive about the impact their gender might have on the interviews, but soon realised that there was no need to worry. The women at GK seemed indifferent to the fact that they were talking with men and my friends appeared very subtle and perceptive in their interview techniques. They were quite versatile in rural dialects, a fact that was highly valued by the women.

I talked with each woman two or three times, entering into more complex levels of discussion with each interview and filling gaps or extending especially interesting themes I had come across in the former interviews. The interviews were held in an informal conversational way and all tape-recorded. I collected about three hours of interview material with each woman. In addition I undertook contextual interviews with a few husbands and daughters, garment workers and their employers, village women who were not engaged in formal work, GK staff and directors, as well as staff from other organisations, activists from the women’s movement, politicians and academics. I also spoke to people from funding organisations and individuals who had been connected with GK in the past. I kept a diary with my daily personal observations and thoughts. For an up to date record of the current GAD debates in Bangladesh I collected newspaper clips and attended seminars and workshops organised by NGOs and the feminist movement in Dhaka (e.g. National Convention on Empowerment of Women: Nairobi to Beijing, National Workshop on Women and Literacy, Human Rights are Women’s Rights Seminar and various seminars at BIDS).

I conducted a questionnaire survey (see Appendix Three) with 80 per cent of the women involved at GK towards the latter end of my field work period i.e. after having already established rapport with the women at GK as recommended by Islam, M. (1982). The data generated by the questionnaire is presented mainly in simple (cross-) tabulations showing percentages. The questionnaire provided useful numeric information on general issues such as women’s age, educational background, marital status, household composition and land ownership (see Chapter Four). The survey helped to create profiles of the women, which served
as a framework in which to place the detailed life-histories of the women with whom I carried out my thirty core interviews.

3.5 Analysis

Analysing the overwhelming amount of field material proved an enormously time-consuming, nerve-wrecking and messy task. I had started transcribing interviews in the field myself, using Moni's English version of the interview. After realising, however, that Moni's efficiency in English was not good enough to tease out the rich 'thick ethnographic' part of the data I had to find someone, who would translate all my tapes from Bengali into English. I could not afford professional transcribers, but was lucky to have found interested university friends, whose English was far more sophisticated than Moni's. I involved them in transcribing all my material verbatim. The result of this extra phase of work was amazing and well worth all the effort, but it also meant that I came back to London with masses of text, large parts of it hand written as my friends had no access to computers. My thirty core interviews alone already came to approximately ninety hours of taped interview material.

Back in London the first thing I did was pin a 'personality sheet' (see Appendix One) with the most basic details and characteristics of all thirty women on my wall. Just as in the transcribing process where one relives the interview situation again by hearing the voice of the woman, remembering the moments she laughed or got excited about a subject or thoughtful and sad, this personality sheet helped to make the women become alive again. Seeing the names in front of you calls back memories of each single woman. One can picture the face, the way she behaved and moved, how she held her body, how she related to me and others. This personality sheet also helped when I started to read the interviews one by one as I could immediately recall who the woman was. When I read the interviews for a second time I started to work on them ie I began with the initial preliminary coding stage making explanatory notes on the margins. Next I highlighted recurring themes, key words or phrases, feelings or anecdotes, labelling them using different colours. During this process the researcher painfully tries to look for themes/concepts that emerge from the woman's
perspective. In reality 'emic' (people's own perceptions) and 'etic' (our concepts) categories are inevitably intertwined as 'it is virtually impossible for the researcher to banish all of her/his prior thoughts from the analysis, since her/his research will have been based around theory-driven selection of participants, and because even noticing an "emic" code will have required interpretation (Cook and Crang 1995:82). I tried to follow Cook's and Crang's suggestion by asking myself during the coding process how much it was 'the participant's world view or some composite of my representation of her/his world view' (Cook and Crang 1995:82).

My next step in analysis was to draw out 'mindmaps' or 'cognitive maps' for each single woman (Jones 1985, Buzan 1992).

Cognitive mapping is a method of modelling persons' beliefs in diagrammatic form ... In mapping we are listening for, and seeking to represent, persons' explanatory and predictive theories about those aspects of their world being described to us (Jones 1985:59-60).

This was again a time-consuming task, but had the advantage of laying out an entire interview in a visual format (see Appendix Four). Each woman's lived experience and story was set down on one piece of paper. The major themes on each 'mindmap' were derived from a combination of theory-driven topics as well as aspects that turned out to be important to the women. Each dominant theme again had subthemes which would branch out like a spider-web into subcategories. The maps included indexed codes and key quotes. They depicted the woman's world view i.e. her position in society, perception of herself and others, her concepts of ideas and beliefs as well as her reflections on events and their relationships in the past, present and future, shown in the map by lines or arrows. With this method I was able to get the masses of material under better control. This allowed me to gain an impression and understanding of each woman's lived experience without always having to go back to each interview. Whenever I felt the need to dig out more detail I would follow my indexed codes and return to the original transcript. What happened next was drawing connections between the various categories and then comparing different aspects amongst the thirty women, searching for commonalities and differences. Contextual material such as linking thoughts to theory, secondary sources, my own contextual interviews and personal notes fed into a better understanding of the reasons behind women's actions, behaviour patterns and thoughts. Women's
memories and descriptions of their own past and the lifestyle of their mother's generations served as parameters of change.

3.6 Ethics and my position as a researcher

How does the theoretical debate on positionality, reflexivity and representation as discussed in section 3.3 relate to my own experience in Bangladesh and how did I deal with these issues in the field?

As a single woman in an Islamic country doing feminist research I was naturally torn between conforming to the rules and cultural expectations to the extent of not offending anybody and still being able to maintain my own integrity. I tried to be as humble as possible, but at the same time honest in my behaviour. One such decision was my choice of clothes. I did not want to pretend to be someone I could not relate to. I deliberately refused to wear the traditional Islamic *salvar kameez*\(^{18}\) that young single women in Bangladesh and adult women in Pakistan and parts of North India are expected to wear and that most other western female researchers wear during their fieldwork. I decided to wear what I felt comfortable in and what was practicable for fieldwork. My field 'uniform', which ironically was in some way quite similar to the women's uniforms at GK, consisted of baggy T-shirts and cotton trousers, trainers and a scarf to protect my head from the sun. For special occasions, however, when I felt like dressing in a more 'feminine' way, for instance when going to marches, dinners or visiting friends in Dhaka, I traded in my comfortable field 'uniform' against the glamorous *sari*. Seeing me in a *sari* pleased the people at GK and they took great pride in it. They appreciated my effort at wearing 'traditional'\(^{19}\) clothes which accentuated - at least externally - the Bengaliness in me. I did not mind wearing a *sari* and actually really enjoyed it, because I did not associate Islamic traditionality with it as I did with the *salvar kameez*. Wearing a *sari* symbolised Indian culture and Bangladeshi independence\(^{20}\) and by doing so I maintained my integrity. I did not feel as if I was conforming to the rules of Islamic propriety that a *salvar kameez* suggested. In my occasional change of clothes from 'masculine field uniform' to 'feminine non-work *sari*' I underwent similar identity transformations as did the women at GK when changing from their GK uniform

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to their original dress.

I see my position as a researcher in the Bangladesh context as particular in the sense that I am neither 'black' nor 'white', neither 'insider' nor 'outsider'. In the West, especially in Germany where I was raised, I would be defined and seen by others as 'black', different from the norm, 'exotic', whereas in Bangladesh people in the streets would constantly stare at me and refer to me as the 'white foreigner'. I experienced different identities through others’ perceptions of my skin colour when shifting locations. In that sense I do not fit neatly into any category, neither that of a postcolonial sub-continental 'insider' nor that of the non-authentic white western 'outsider'. I was moving between colours, identities and cultures. I decided to accept my ‘outsider-ness’ and concentrate on learning as much as possible from the ‘insiders’ I met and worked with. When using the term ‘insider’, I am aware of the fact that even these so-called ‘insiders’ were still different to the women at GK by class and gender, as some of my translators were male and middle class.

Boas (cited in Wax 1971:31) suggested using ‘native texts’ rather than material collected by trained ethnographers. Ideally, the researcher should have a thorough command of the native language, but as he argues, this was often not realistic and the closest one could get to the ideal was collaborating with a proficient translator. According to Islam, S. (1982:15) the role of translators and assistants is very important. She recommends a ‘team approach’, where assistants are not perceived as ‘mere data collectors’, but ideally become involved in the overall research process. In reality, however,

... it is almost too much to expect that the project should have the same importance to them as to the researcher. To most research assistants the work is a job ... (Westergaard 1982:47).

I was very lucky with my assistants as all were close friends. Their genuine motivation to participate in the research project was due to our friendship and their interest in helping me, rather than just the money. Moni proved an excellent ice-breaker in those first months at GK and the women we talked with liked her immediately and trusted her. Jamal and Monju, who undertook the more complex interview rounds were incredibly dedicated to the research. Whenever there was anything unclear and confusing they discussed it with me.
I had many long and intense conversations with them about various aspects of my research, about the women's behaviour and about the project, and learned a great deal about Bengali culture and values in general. I was very touched that my friends found the work equally rewarding as they had never had the opportunity to gain an in-depth firsthand experience of working with poor rural women. They were amazed at how much they had learned from the women's stories.

However, I am also painfully aware of the limitations of my research. Within the constraints of writing a thesis I was not able to give back what I had received from the women I met at GK. I couldn't help Majilla find a new job, but I listened to her and gave her comfort one day when she was extremely upset and in tears. I could not help Momtaz with the difficulties she had with her violent husband, but I listened to the stories of his atrocities and promised to give her a copy of her life-story in Bengali, that she wanted to keep as a personal document. I couldn't help Nargis in her despair when I went to visit her in her village for an interview and heard that her husband had died the day before. All I could do was listen to them, respect their ideas and decisions and remain humble.

My overall research purpose stresses the need to move away from former images of Bangladeshi women as 'passive victims'. Living under disempowering conditions does not imply they are entirely powerless. Power relations do exist in my position and difference in background, class and privileges, but the role the women at GK took during the interviews was certainly not that of 'passive victims'. They decided whether they wanted to talk to me and when. Sometimes some women decided to have a break all of a sudden or postpone the interview to another day. I was dependent on their cooperation, time and interest.

Kaleka, for example, was a remarkable woman and would have been fascinating to talk to. She had worked in GK for over ten years. She still lives in the campus, but has her own tempo21 business (local taxi business). She paid off one of the GK vehicles (tempo) and is now a self-employed taxi driver, the only woman in Bangladesh who runs this kind of service. All my approaches towards her were in vain: she was always too busy with her work and showed no interest in an
She started work early in the mornings and came back home late at night. Often I would see her tend to her tempo and fix the machine or be annoyed with an accident she had been involved in. In her early days she had spoken to many foreigners and was also filmed, so what, she said, was the point in talking to me? She had more important things to do and wanted to be left in peace, which I found perfectly understandable.

Not many women, however, reacted like Kaleka. Most people at GK were generally very open towards me and with the women with whom I had talked a mutual respect developed as well as particular friendships. I would ‘hang out’ with some women in their leisure time: have a tea at the canteen together, invite them for a snack in my room or vice versa, play with their children, have an evening stroll in the campus or occasionally accompany them to their villages.

With time my language and cultural skills progressed and I began to feel less of an ‘outsider’ than at the beginning of my fieldwork. GK almost became like a home to me and I was happy there. I also established an extensive network of friends and maintained regular contact with local experts and key individuals in my field such as practitioners in other NGOs, activists in the feminist movement, academics, other researchers doing similar work to mine (either from abroad or linked with BIDS) and members of the Dhaka intelligentsia.

Discussions with my friends, consultation with local experts and my reflections on the feed-back from these intense dialogues was one way of helping me come to terms with my own shortcomings and cultural ignorance. This was my way of interpreting feminists claim to increased dialogue between first and third world academics/practitioners. It has been argued that first world feminists should search for ‘authorising’ response from third world women by increased dialogue, coalition and cooperation (Goetz 1991, Radcliffe 1994, Reagan 1993, Spivak 1990, Staeheli and Lawson 1994). I furthermore tried to follow Radcliffe’s (1994:29) suggestion of making use of our locations - making use of ‘the structures and strengths and powers of the academy’ - by sending the people I met in Bangladesh research material such as specific articles or information on possible funding bodies.
Before I left Bangladesh I was asked to give a seminar at the centre of Social Studies in Dhaka, where local students were invited to listen to my experience and participate in the seminar. I was also asked to give a talk at GK about the work I had done. This was quite an experience as all the workers - including all the women I had talked to - had been invited to listen to me and quite a few of them took the opportunity to ask me direct questions. As regards future collaboration with third world activists, I would like to return to Bangladesh after finishing my thesis in order to present my final results to the women workers and staff members at Gonoshasthaya Kendra and also share my findings with any other interested NGOs or women’s groups.

Notes


4. See in this context also Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) on ethnography and reflexivity.


7. See in this context also Mohammed (1996), who in her study on Pakistani womens' identities in Britain argued that she, being a Pakistani woman herself, had to constantly negotiate the differences between herself and the researched, shifting between the positions of an 'insider' and 'outsider'.

8. See in this context also Radcliffe (1994).

9. Bhachu gives the example of arranged marriages having the potential of being 'liberating' for some of the women involved (Bhachu 1985:45). Spivak mentions the Bangladeshi feminist Farida Akhter who argues that the western term 'gender' is used in a reactionary way in Bangladesh undermining the 'real work of the women's movement' (Spivak 1985:186).

10. See, for example, the collection of essays in de Lauretis 1986, Goetz 1991 and Reagan 1983.

12. See, for example, Lucius and Osner (1992). In their ‘Interpretations of Lifestories’ the women they interviewed were selected by Grameen Bank. They ‘were already familiar with the collection of lifestories and had been prepared thoroughly by Grameen Bank for the visit of the exposure group ... the group was accompanied by a facilitator, who was a staff member of Grameen Bank’ (Lucius and Osner 1992:11). The fact of pre-selecting ‘show case’ women and having them ‘prepared’ for the interviews by a ‘facilitator’ carries the obvious dangers of getting biased answers. There is the danger of women feeling pressurised by the non-neutral facilitator to answer in a particular way.


14. Westergaard (1982) had similar experiences with her female assistants, who would not stay in the villages as their parents did not allow them to do so.

15. Blanchet (1982) describes a similar experience with her urban assistant, who did not know how to relate to village women, as she felt superior to them.

16. Sabina had problems with the plain food at GK and therefore brought her own lunch, her mother had prepared for her.

17. I undertook the survey with 127 women.

18. Traditional Islamic dress *i.e.* loose trousers, long loose tunic covering the arms and a cotton headscarf (*worna*).

19. I use the term ‘traditional’ here in a purely cultural sense.

20. Wearing *saris*, rather than *salvar kameez*, a *teep* (spot worn by Hindu women to indicate their marital status) on the forehead and singing Tagore songs symbolised a political contestation of Pakistan and official Islamic values (Kabeer 1989:8-9, White 1992:11-12). *Saris* and the *teep* were associated with Hinduism. Singing in itself is not part of the Islamic culture. When Bangladeshis therefore sing the Bengali anthem, which was written by Tagore (who was from India and a Hindu), they deliberately do this to celebrate Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan.

21. A *tempo* is a larger version of a *rickshaw*.

22. The women at Naripokkho, for example, had shown their interest in my results and have asked me to present my work at one of their seminars when I return to Bangladesh.
Plate 4.1 Map of Bangladesh showing location of Gonoshasthaya Kendra
Chapter Four: Empowerment in the context of Bangladesh - Gonoshasthaya Kendra

4.1 The situation of women in Bangladesh

The area of Bangladesh is about two thirds that of the United Kingdom (White 1991). It has a population of approximately 120 million people. With about 800 people per square kilometre it has one of the highest densities in the world (Bangladesh National Report 1995). In international aid circles Bangladesh is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world: according to the 1997 World Development Report the Gross National Product (GNP) per capita is 240 US dollars. Bangladesh has an exceptionally high dependency on foreign aid, such that every year $2-2.5 billions are channelled into Bangladesh in the form of foreign aid. During the 1980s 85-100 per cent of the country's development budget was funded from foreign aid (Jansen 1992). According to Sobhan (1990) the benefits of this aid are distributed very unevenly. It has mostly benefitted a small urban elite consisting of bureaucrats, commission agents, contractors and consultants. The creation of elites as a result of dependence on aid leads to discrimination against the poor of Bangladesh, men as well as women.

World Bank figures reveal trends of rural pauperisation and increased landlessness. In 1960 35 per cent of rural households were landless compared to 45 per cent in 1984 (World Bank 1990). High level of landlessness are related to population growth and the inheritance system, where land is split up equally amongst sons, resulting in fragmented landholdings. Growing pauperisation in rural areas and unequal land distribution drives many landless or land-poor households to migrate to urban centres, finding shelter in squatter settlements (Pryer and Crook 1988).

These trends have exposed women in particular to severe economic pressure. Other mechanisms related to gender disparities within the setting of a patriarchal society have affected women's lives in Bangladesh in a number of ways. In Bangladesh, as in several other South Asian countries, life expectancy for women is lower than for men, with a sex ratio of 94 females for 100 males.
One of the reasons for the masculine sex ratio in Bangladesh is the high rate of maternal mortality (887 per 100,000 births - World Bank 1997). An early start to childbearing and frequent pregnancies are among the main factors responsible for this. Female malnutrition resulting from biased food allocation must also be taken into account (Chen et al. 1981, Kabeer 1989a). Women are supposed to eat last and least, and their nutritional intake is only eighty-eight per cent of men’s (Rahman and Hossain 1992, Kabeer 1989a). This practice derives from the myth that men need more food as they perform harder work than women (Elahi 1993). Hence women are socialised into ‘an ideal of self-sacrifice, which begins with food denial’ (Jackson 1998:50).

There is strong gender discrimination in access to health care, education and training. When they fall ill, men and boys are more likely to receive medical attention than women and girls (Pryer and Crook 1988, Kabeer 1989a, World Bank 1990). Literacy rates for men and women in 1994 were 45 per cent and 24 per cent respectively (Bangladesh National Report 1995). According to Bangladesh’s First Five Year Plan (1973-1978) women’s education was seen merely as a means of training them for their roles as ‘mothers of the nation’s future leaders’ (Islam 1979). As a matter of fact only about five per cent of women are enrolled in technical and professional education (Mahila Parishad Commission Report 1993). Women’s insufficient educational qualifications leave them with no other option than working in low-paid sectors of the highly gender-segregated labour market. Studies have found different wages for men and women in various employment sectors (Begum 1988, Rahman and Hossain 1992). In addition, women’s seclusion, sanctioned by traditional practices and beliefs, reduces mobility and limits women’s employment opportunities (Kabeer 1989a).

In the strictest sense the ideology of purdah demands the segregation of women and men into separate spaces whereby women are confined to the domestic sphere, which detaches them from the monetary economy. In general women are not associated with handling cash as they are not accepted in the market place (Ackerly 1995, Goetz 1996a, Hashemi and Schuler 1993).

The market or bazaar is, at the symbolic level, the locus of some of the vilest of human qualities - greed, competition, acquisition. A
‘woman of the bazaar’ is a prostitute. The market therefore represents the last frontier in women’s protection and exclusion, and their presence in the market signifies a major shift in the changing landscape of women’s mobility (Hashemi and Schuler 1993:7).

Women’s mobility is restricted once girls reach puberty. They may not attend religious meetings, enter mosques or participate in festivities. They have separate tanks or ponds for bathing and washing (Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980). When women have to go out of the home they are expected to wear a burqa (cloak) to conceal the body and face. A milder version of practising purdah can be to cover the head with a scarf or the top part of the sari. Women who do not own burqas sometimes use an umbrella to symbolise purdah. Women are usually expected to keep their head slightly bowed and their eyes to the ground in order to avoid direct eye-contact with unknown men. The practice of purdah separates women from direct interaction with non-family males.

The degree of purdah can vary according to regions as well as women’s age, class and position in the family. Newly-married women’s mobility is especially restricted as they are ‘perceived as particularly risky, having recently had their dormant passions aroused’ (White 1992:154).

Young girls and newlywed women are expected to observe stricter purdah ... A newlywed wife will cover her head in front of her mother in law as well (Ahmed and Naher 1987:56).

Girls are forced to marry early. As new brides, they are expected (even more than at other ages) to behave in a shy, subservient manner, and they are under pressure to prove their fertility by producing children. At this stage in their lives, they are particularly unlikely to make independent decisions ... Social and economic dependence on men is the normal situation for poor women in rural Bangladesh. Because of purdah, they are confined to the homestead and the area immediately surrounding it, and their contacts with the world outside the family are extremely limited (Hashemi and Schuler 1994:1-2).

Women’s segregation and isolation is reinforced by kinship structures such as the patrilocal and patrilineal marriage system. Once a woman is married she moves into the house of her in-laws, which if located in another village separates her physically from her family of origin and cuts her off from any support she might have been able to get from them. Elahi (1993) speaks of a sudden change for women as they ‘move into a new social and spatial environment’ (Elahi 1993:85).
This situation also makes it more difficult for women to claim their share of inheritance. Daughters inherit half the amount sons do, but even then they often trade in their shares in exchange for protection from their brothers in the event of their husband’s death, or divorce or abandonment since women hardly have alternative support networks to the institution of the family. Marriages tend to be arranged without any particular consideration to the bride’s wishes. Young girls often get married to men who are approximately ten years older (Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980:9). Hence women are already socialised at an early age to obedience, dependence and the fulfilment of their ‘duties’. Marriage is commonly regarded as the one and only goal for a woman.

From her childhood, a girl is trained to fit into the only socially acceptable role, that of being a wife and mother (Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980:12).


... ‘if the girl is not married in time (soon after puberty), her youth will be spoiled’ and ‘people will speak ill of girls kept unmarried long in the family’ (Elahi 1993:85).

In Bangladesh a woman’s virtue is regarded as a key value which has to be constantly protected (Kabeer 1984). As Elahi’s quotes suggest girls are therefore married off as soon as possible in order not to endanger this virtue.

4.2 National efforts to women’s empowerment and the role of NGOs

For some time now, however, various social groups in Bangladesh have been showing an interest in women, be it the state, market institutions or NGOs. Although the emphasis in my dissertation is on women’s experiences in an NGO, one must not forget that other important links have been established between women, the government and the private market.

The women’s movement in North America and Europe had an impact on international donor policies, which was subsequently reflected in national policies in Bangladesh. The government’s emphasis was on income-generation
programmes. In 1976 the government declared the reservation of 10 per cent of
government posts for women. This excluded, however, technical posts and posts
in the defence services - jobs that were considered 'inappropriate' for women. In
the same year the Social Welfare Sector was divided in order to create a new
sector: the Women's Affairs Division. While the Social Welfare Sector continued
to provide welfarist programmes for women, the Women's Affairs Division was
given the responsibility for promoting women's socio-economic status. When in
1978 the Division was transformed into a Ministry, Bangladesh had its first
woman minister. Currently in Bangladesh women are heads of both the leading
and the opposition party.

Even private market forces are said to have an influence on women's
empowerment, particularly in the last decade. Ninety per cent of the 800,000
workers of the fairly new ready-made garment manufacturing industry in
Bangladesh are women (United Nations Development Programme 1994). In a
context where cultural norms of female seclusion have kept most women away
from the public arena in the past, such new developments have changed the
country's landscape enormously. Nowadays groups of women can be seen on the
streets of Dhaka on their way to and from work. Also credit institutions, like the
world famous Grameen Bank, are particularly targeting women as their clients.
On the one hand this approach is perceived as a way to empower women
(economically). On the other hand women have also proven to be more reliable
and manageable clients than men. In other words, it pays to invest in women,
whose loan recovery rates tend to be as high as 95 per cent (Goetz and Sen
Gupta 1996, White 1991). By far the key actors in Bangladesh in terms of
women's empowerment, however, are the NGOs.

NGOs have been categorised in many ways, for example, by their origin, scale,
ownership, size and orientation (Farrington and Bebbington 1993, Friedmann
1992, Hulme and Edwards 1992). Some distinguish them according to their
political activity into radical and non-radical organisations (Clark 1991). Others
classify them in terms of geographical coverage and sources of funding into local,
national/southern and international/northern NGOs (Lewis 1992, Jamil 1994).
a useful definition of 'development NGOs' as:
... all those organisations which are involved in various development activities with the objective of alleviating the poverty of the rural and urban poor [acting as] ... a catalyst making sustained interventions to promote self-directing, self-financing, locally accountable institutions and initiating the process of people-centred development at the grassroots.

Bangladesh has witnessed a phenomenal increase of NGOs since its birth in 1971. In 1997 1122 NGOs were registered with the NGO Bureau (Devine 1998) and are estimated to support up to 13,000 local groups (Lewis 1992). While a few NGOs existed already in East Pakistan they became particularly significant during the post-liberation period.

A combination of increased external funding and the patriotic idealism of university students seeking to reconstruct their newly independent country, created a perfect environment in which NGOs could easily expand (Devine 1996:16).

In this early stage the focus was primarily on relief and rehabilitation. Towards the mid 1970s the emphasis shifted towards integrated community development influenced by the Comilla model. NGOs, however, were soon disillusioned with this model as it failed to address inherent power relations within the society. The benefits of community development did not trickle down to the poor. By that time Freire’s theories had reached international popularity. NGOs in Bangladesh were following his ‘consciousness-raising’ approach in the late 1970s throughout the 1980s. Those were the hey days for NGOs in Bangladesh, which were by then considered dominant actors in development intervention. Now NGOs play a major role in recent debates on ‘women’s empowerment’ (though basically understood as economic empowerment), ‘good governance’ and ‘civil society.’

There are different reactions to the NGOs effectiveness in poverty alleviation. International donors, for example, have shifted their attention towards NGOs and within the context of a ‘weak state’ believe in the ‘comparative advantage’ of NGOs vis-à-vis the state. In this view NGOs appear to be more informal, flexible, efficient, cost effective and closer to the grassroots than large-scale government organisations (Fowler 1988). Wood (1994b) has a more critical outlook on NGOs. For the particular situation in Bangladesh he finds that:

... a specific aspect of the ‘good governance’ issue concerns the franchising of state responsibilities to NGOs ... There are now several large NGOs in Bangladesh in effect tendering with government and donors for the franchise to take over major
services in the society: primary education; adult literacy; primary health; rural banking (Wood 1994b:2).

The rise in power and influence of NGOs in Bangladesh has, however, made the government increasingly suspicious of them. The tension between NGOs and the state culminated in 1992 when an NGO Bureau was established as a centralised control mechanism over NGO activities. Consciousness raising approaches were perceived as a threat to the status quo and NGOs were subsequently warned not to be political. Some critical voices, such as Hashemi, assume that therefore

[most NGOs [in Bangladesh] have, over the years, given up such strategies of 'organising the poor' ... sanitised their activities (if not their rhetoric), and chosen the path of delivering economic assistance ... (Hashemi 1994:7).

NGOs in Bangladesh have also been criticised for being extremely donor-dependent (Sobhan 1990). Trends in the international donor community tend to have a strong influence on the direction development activities take. The difficulty of measuring consciousness and an 'overall shift towards the right within the world community' were also reasons for the move away from mobilisation of the poor towards credit provision (White 1991:13). Credit has now become all the rage in NGO and donor circles. It is perceived as the new remedy for poverty alleviation. Donors favour credit provision over consciousness approaches as it provides tangible, measurable results and runs no danger of provoking demands for political change. Besides these concerns the whole notion of credit for increased self-employment is 'in line with the commitment to private initiative capitalism favoured by the World Bank and the major bilateral funders' (White 1991:10).

Grameen Bank's method of credit provision has had an impact on many NGOs in Bangladesh, for example, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Proshika. In fact BRAC has even set up its own bank (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996, White 1991). Besides credit BRAC's activities involve income generation, skills training, health and non-formal education. Founded in 1972, BRAC is now one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh with about 11,000 staff and 1.2 million members (Rao and Kelleher 1995).
Proshika seems to have maintained a stronger emphasis on consciousness raising than BRAC. It started off as a project of the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) and became an independent Bangladeshi organisation in 1976. The main objectives are group formation, human development and skills training. Fifty per cent of its groups are women’s groups. Proshika aims to build up the unity of the poor by providing material independence which should serve as a basis for

...counteracting the structures responsible for their poverty that is wage rates, tenant shares, interest rates, concentrated access to land and water (drinking, irrigation and fishery), other means of production, means of transportation, production skills, education and health (Kramsjo and Wood 1992:30).

Saptogram, one of the smaller women’s organisations, has incorporated credit operations into its programme, targeting women borrowers. Credit serves as an 'entry point' in Saptogram’s approach. It is given for 'non-traditional' activities like crop production, weaving, sericulture and petty trade. Besides the credit element Saptogram is involved in mobilising landless women to fight for their rights such as adequate wages in Food for Work and road construction projects. Some of Saptogram’s members have also managed to form their own village courts to represent women’s interests (Saptogram Annual Report 1991, Kabeer 1994, Goetz 1996a).

Nijeri Kori and Gono Shahajya Shangstha (GSS), on the other hand, have been the most adamant in their objectives of consciousness raising and social mobilisation. Nijeri Kori strongly opposes credit and income generation projects believing that one cannot guarantee women’s ownership of these resources. Both organisations come closest to Freire’s (1972) concept of conscientisation. Their training sessions address feminist as well as class issues: for example, male violence, dowry, polygamy and land rights, wages and police harassment (Kabeer 1989b:31). The organisations have been involved for example in assisting the landless with legal aid and mobilisation for khas land (government land) and in attempts to raise agricultural wages, as well as fighting against powerful shrimp cultivators. However, GSS, after serious clashes with local power elites, has decided to replace its previous political activities with economic ones (Hashemi 1994).
As one can see the major NGOs in Bangladesh - although they have emerged from a similar history - tackle poverty alleviation in different ways. GK, my case study organisation, is another example of how diversified the NGO community in Bangladesh is. It does not apply the standard shamittee method used by NGOs like BRAC or Proshika. Their claim to collective action comprises, for example, organising groups to fight for higher wages and to take part in the shalish and in local elections (Carr et al. 1996, Kramsjo and Wood 1992, Lewis 1992). In GK's case, however, the women come from many different villages and meet in one place, where they then have the opportunity to form new alliances in that specific community. Rather than working with small women's groups on an individual village level, GK draws women together from separate villages and unites them within the individual organisation. Collective relationships, solidarity networks and group consciousness can therefore develop inside the agency.

4.3 Gonoshasthaya Kendra: the setting

GK is situated in Dhamsona Union in Savar thana, 40 km north of the capital Dhaka (see Plate 4.1). A journey on a local bus from Dhaka to GK can take between 1 1/2 to 2 hours. GK is well known amongst the bus drivers. As soon as one reaches the bus stop opposite to GK one hears the driver shout: 'medical', which is how GK is referred to by many locals. From the bus window you already have an initial view of GK as the highway passes right next to it. The GK canteen, which is more of a snackbar cum tea-stall, opens to the road and serves customers from outside as well as GK people. Next door is the GK shop selling some of GK's products on a very small scale for the occasional bypasser. In order to enter the GK premises you need to pass the security guard, who, after you have identified yourself, opens the big gate for you. Turning left leads to the main hospital, a three storied red brick building. The hospital consists of sixty to seventy beds, an X-ray and pathology department, operation theatre and various other consultation rooms.

Next to the hospital a few GK transport vehicles are parked. Walking a few hundred meters away from the hospital towards the fourstoried hostel one passes
Nizam’s grave. On the bottom floor of the hostel are rooms for the male workers and the common dining hall. The floors above are reserved for the women workers and the top floor is usually for GK guests. From the roof of the hostel one has a wonderful view over the GK area. GK covers about ten acres of rice land, parts of it donated in the past and parts acquired more recently. Wandering along the paths leading towards the family quarters of workers and staff one passes rice-fields, large fish tanks, a variety of vegetable gardens and plenty of trees. The land provides food for the workers living at GK and eating at the Gonomess, GK’s dining hall (about 250 workers eat there). After a good 30 minutes walk, the path carries on towards the school, the daycare centre, more housing facilities and the doctors’ hostel, which accommodates GK’s medical staff. Another pond stretches along the way where I often saw women washing their clothes or taking a break from work. Continuing the stroll one reaches one of the newer buildings which now houses most of the administration offices including the GK bank. Some of the rooms are also used as bigger meeting halls. Opposite the building are the welding and carpentry workshops and further ahead lies the herbal garden which faces the vaccine research centre. The lower storey of the vaccine centre houses the handicrafts and blockprinting section. Returning to where the journey started one comes across another brick building housing the antibiotics section and GK’s printing press. Close by are a few more vocational training workshops: the laundry, bakery, shoe-making, construction and jute-plastic section.

4.4 History

In 1971, during the liberation war, a few young Bangladeshi doctors who were studying in the United Kingdom - amongst them Zafurullah Chowdhury - managed to mobilise money from Bangladeshi doctors all over the world to assist the freedom fighters (Ray 1986). These young men decided to return to Bangladesh to support the liberation war. GK began as a 480-bed field hospital on the Indian border for the wounded (Chowdhury 1995). After the war, in 1972, it transferred to Savar. It started its activities in a tent, without any electricity or telephone, its workers even having to fetch water from a mile away (Ray 1986:2-3). In the early 1970s Savar was a typical rural community. There was
no industry, no health complex and no NGOs. GK staff remember the area, where GK now stands, as a forest which volunteers from the local surroundings helped clear out in order to establish GK, the first NGO there. The post-liberation atmosphere was a euphoric time when many traditional values were giving way to secular efforts. Freedom fighters, when coming home from war with access to arms and strong links to the political powers of the new state, were celebrated as heroes. In many villages the old conservative guard (often collaborators with the Pakistani army) was replaced by the leadership of a new generation.

Young leaders were thinking with vision and excitement about the possible future of their communities and became eagerly involved with the task of reconstruction after the devastation wrought by the war (White 1991:12).

The media played a significant role in these changes by sending out slogans on building up a new nation and portraying the image of an independent country. GK was born out of this idealism. Gonoshasthaya Kendra - The People's Health Centre - as the name suggests is an organisation whose vision and principle objective is and always has been: 'health for all'. Therefore all other projects are interwoven with this basic aim. GK doctors perceived their upper class upbringing and their classical medical education as inappropriate for the rural Bangladesh context and proposed an entire reorganisation of the existing health system in Bangladesh. Their early experiences of working with the local people was a period of re-education. It was a period of revising their own preconceived ideas about what was necessary for the country and learning from the people what was of relevance to them (Garilao and Luz n.d.). This early learning process taught GK to approach health from a holistic point of view, emphasising all-round well-being of a person and not only absence of disease. GK's approach to health therefore addresses poverty issues such as malnutrition, illiteracy, lack of clean water and sanitary living conditions. The organisation also campaigned successfully against the exploitative practices of 'bazaar doctors' who in alliance with rich farmers cheated the poor of their land (Ray 1986). Concentrating on the poor GK provided preventive and primary health care services for the surrounding villages, where access to health services was almost non-existent. GK achieved outstanding results in its health programme, wiping out diseases such as measles and tetanus in the surrounding areas and reducing the maternal
mortality rate.26

GK's most innovative programme in the early 1970s was training young unmarried women from the villages to be para-medics. The idea of training these women to become barefoot doctors was borrowed from the Chinese. These para-medics acted as agents of change within their own communities. Their responsibilities covered vaccination and immunisation, maintaining records of birth and death, pregnancy care, treatment of common diseases and spreading information about public health, hygiene, family planning and nutrition as well as creating social awareness among the villagers, particularly the women. One of the major advantages of female para-medics was their greater ease of access to rural women and hence their ability to address rural women's health needs directly.

Encouraged by women in GK, village women began to use the clinics more frequently, to consult the doctors about their own problems and to make demands on the services being offered (GK Report 1986:5).

GK attracted highly motivated and dedicated people in its founding period. Many of the people in leadership positions today have been involved with GK from the early days. Female staff, however, had to face many difficulties. They used to go to the villages on bicycles, unaccompanied and unveiled, with the mission of recruiting women for the para-medic programme and later on for the vocational training centre. However, even during the fairly liberal post-war period such behaviour was considered as far too provocative by the village communities. Sondha, who joined GK to be a para-medic when she was about eighteen, remembers the early days:

Everyday we went to the villages and talked to the villagers, both men and women and also to the religious priests ... I was so young that time ... They called me a prostitute and said 'don't talk to our women or they will become prostitutes like you, because you are coming without a veil, without a burqa and with no men to accompany you'. (Sondha, GK management, 1995).

GK staff, however, persisted in their village work and carried on convincing villagers (including community leaders) to let their women come to GK. Eventually GK's rapport with the surrounding villages stabilised. For example, the sight of GK women on bikes is no longer an issue. I witnessed this change of reaction myself when accompanying para-medics to a GK health post in a
nearby village. Whereas GK women were called prostitutes and stones were thrown at them in the early days, the treatment now was very friendly. Wherever we went the women were recognised and people were waving at us and calling out 'GK'. GK health workers are now well accepted and respected by the communities who appreciate the fact that health services are delivered directly to people’s homes. The para-medic training programme was one of GK’s biggest achievements. So far, over 4000 para-medics have been trained. Many of them are now successfully employed in other governmental or non-governmental projects.

Over the years GK developed into a complex integrated rural development project including other sectors besides health such as education, nutrition, agriculture, microbiology, vaccine research, herbal medicinal plant research, income generation and vocational training. GK also played a leading role in advocating the national health and drug policies. GK began its campaigning in the early 1970s by briefing local newspapers about the unethical practices of drug companies and informing the general public of the ‘flooding of Third World markets with inappropriate and harmful drugs’ (Chowdhury 1995:46). However, it took another decade before the national drug policy was formulated in 1982. Zafrullah Chowdhury was part of the Expert Committee which was to undertake an evaluation of all drugs in Bangladesh. In all 1,742 drugs were found to be harmful or ineffective and to be banned (Chowdhury 1995). At that time GK was finally granted permission to establish Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals Limited (GPL). The idea behind GPL, GK’s major industrial venture, was to produce high quality, but low-cost, essential drugs. It was also the first factory of that kind to open up many new job opportunities for women.

For their health programme, GK needed medicine but some of these were not produced locally and therefore very expensive. It was then that GK decided to put up its own pharmaceutical factory (Garilao and Luz n.d.:13).

The pharmaceutical factory began producing drugs at very competitive prices and thus managed to force multinationals into cutting down their prices and giving up their monopolistic position in the market. GPL was profitable during the 1980s, but is currently making a loss and therefore receiving loans from the GK Trust and bank.
GK's involvement in politics, however, led to a crisis in 1990 after the fall of the Ershad regime. The organisation was criticised for its connection to the military government that had been using GK to sanitise its international image. GK came under attack from various sides. Donors began to pull out; GK was blacklisted by the Bangladesh Medical Association and banned from ADAB (Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh); an investigation team was sent by the new government to inspect GK and GPL; and Zafrullah Chowdhury nearly got arrested. GK came to a temporary standstill. Nevertheless both the national drug policy as well as GK managed to survive the political turmoil of that period. The latest development in GK has been the opening of the GK university in 1997. It includes a medical and nursing school and offers postgraduate training in the hospitals, clinics and field programmes.

The chart below explains the major events and programmes in GK since its foundation in 1972.

**Major Events:**

1972 - Establishment of Gonoshasthaya Kendra in Savar
- Integrated health and family planning programme

1973 - Establishment of the women's centre: Nari Kendra (handicrafts and sewing)
- Agricultural work in the mornings

1974 - Introduction of female sterilisation (first time in Bangladesh)
- Start of non-formal school
- Training female para-medics and teaching them to ride bicycles

1975 - Establishment of subcentres

1976 - The para-medic Nizam is murdered
- Expansion of the women's centre to include non-traditional skills: opening of the metal workshop

1977 - Training of women cooperatives in primary health care
- Tour of Dhaka from Savar by 22 female para-medics on bicycles

1978 - Setting up of carpentry and shoe-making workshops
1979 - GK bakery

1981 - Establishment of Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals
- GK Printing Press

1982 - GK plays a role in formulating the National Drug Policy
- Jute-plastic factory

1983 - Establishment of subcentres

1985 - Relief programme in cyclone affected areas

1987 - Relief activities
- Raw materials production for Gonoshasthaya Antibiotics

1990 - Attempt at drawing up a National Health Policy
- Collapse of Ershad government - GK crisis

1991 - Post cyclone relief in Cox’s Bazaar

1992 - Relief programme in Rohingya Refugee camp
- Post cyclone rehabilitation programme
- Construction of schools and cyclone shelters
- Establishment of Gonoshasthaya vaccine research and microbiology laboratory

1993 - Gonoshasthaya Kendra Dhaka
(urban health programme in the capital)

Source: Anubhav Series 1993

4.5 Ideology

Like the other NGOs I mentioned above GK applies a combination of strategies towards empowerment which include income generation schemes and consciousness-raising programmes. Most of the other organisations, however, seem to have undergone significant shifts in their development approaches over the years. Credit provision has become a major issue with the majority of NGOs in Bangladesh. With GK, on the other hand, health as an ‘entry point’ to mobilising the poor has remained predominant throughout the years.
GK's overall objectives are:

To work with the people, for the people, by the people to develop a just society through

* establishing women's rights by changing their status in society

* promoting education among the poor, particularly poor women and children

* developing a people-oriented health care system

* working with people on their economic emancipation by organising income-generation activities and by organising poor and landless people to defend their interests

* playing an advocacy role to influence policy at the national and international level which directly and indirectly will benefit the poor (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994:3).

Apart from these GK has also made it clear since its early days how important a certain level of self-reliance is to the organisation. One of the reasons for engaging in more commercial activities like the pharmaceuticals firm and other businesses was precisely GK's wish to become less dependent on donor money. GK does not accept funding from U.S. sources, for example, as it perceives the U.S. as an imperialist force.

GK's philosophy is strongly rooted in its history and the visions people had during the post-liberation period, which explains the agency's high demands on the staff:

... the semi-communal lifestyle at Savar, the morning agriculture, the insistence on Bangla at every level rather than English, the expectation of hard work and total honesty and no private practice, and the commitment to employing rural working class people. Whilst some of these things cause difficulties for the management of a big, dispersed organisation, in total they are an enormous source of strength (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994:3).

The agency's physical arrangement is unique compared to other NGOs in Bangladesh: it is a commune-like, self-sufficient community of its own. The GK campus, as described above, houses directors, staff, doctors and workers alike. With the exception of Zafrullah Chowdhury, who now divides his time between
Savar and Dhaka, these different groups all live a fairly harmonious day-to-day life together at GK. Apart from married couples, where both spouses work for GK, people live in hostels and eat at the communal dining hall. It is quite common for members of different ranks to share a room: for example, a programme supervisor and a worker, a doctor and a para-medic.

Not only do people from different ranks live together harmoniously, but also people from different religions. An important aspect of GK’s overall policy is its secularism. Muslims and non-Muslims work, eat and live together at GK. They are treated equally and their respective religious festivities are acknowledged and celebrated in GK. The egalitarian living and eating arrangements are supposed to generate a sense of unity amongst the people at GK. The idea behind everyone’s, including the directors’, participation in the morning agricultural work, furthermore, is, the belief that nobody should think he or she is ‘too good’ for this kind of labour (i.e. harvesting, weeding, reaping rice paddy etc). It keeps the workers in close touch with agricultural activities and also ensures an efficient use of GK’s land (Anubhav 1997). A major part of GK’s ideology is to create an understanding and closeness to villagers and their lifestyle. GK’s approach to social transformation is the attempt to adapt the founders’ initial visionary innovative programmes to rural reality. It does this by learning from local knowledge. Through discussions with villagers and observation of village lifestyles GK has learned to design its development activities to fit rural people’s time schedules. For example, credit co-operative work with farmers takes place at times convenient for the farmers - early morning and late afternoon. Family planning methods are discussed in the villages as GK para-medics go and visit the women at home rather than expecting them to come to the medical centre. GK also learned that it had to work with the Bengali calendar instead of the European one when dealing with villagers. It learned that its educational programme for children had to allow time off during periods when parents needed their children’s help such as on market days and during the harvesting season.

Another significant characteristic of GK is its strong emphasis on employing people from the grassroots - both men and women - in leadership positions.
Unless it proves totally impossible to find someone from the grassroots for a specific task, GK does not hire someone coming from the middle class - unless that person is willing to de-'class' himself [sic] (Anubhav 1997:6).

Not many other NGOs in Bangladesh have given priority to this issue. Often women's organisations - set up by upper and middle-class women - fail to address inherent class inequities efficiently and 'lack sensitivity to the needs of poorer women despite their desire to work for them' (Young 1993:43, Pohlman 1995). Having staff who are rooted in the villages is a powerful tool for an organisation committed to poverty alleviation in its surrounding communities. Most of the staff have lower middle-class, rural, backgrounds and serve as role models for their communities.

4.6 Management structure

GK is an extremely complex organisation. Central to all its activities is the provision of health care to the poorest with an emphasis on women and children (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994). As health is perceived in a holistic way issues like women's position in society, education and income generation are woven into the various projects. Besides these service and development programmes GK established businesses such as the printing press and the pharmaceutical factory. The vocational training workshops now also incorporate a commercial element. Originally designed to offer vocational training to women, they later on expanded into training-cum-production units in order to remain self-reliant (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994:15). Most of the training courses are organised directly by Nari Kendra and some are conducted jointly with other departments like the printing press or GK construction. So far the jute-plastic, carpentry and metal workshops are making small profits. The pharmaceutical factory on the other hand was making a loss during the time of my study, which, if not solved quickly, could put the entire organisation in jeopardy as GK has already had to mortgage assets to continue to support it (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994).

GK currently employs about 1500 people full-time and about 1000 people part-time and operates in twelve locations (including Savar and Dhaka). The GK
Trust - GK's legal body - consisting of two doctors and two business men has a budget of Tk 440 million (US$ 11 million), about half of which is self-generated (Chowdhury 1995). The GK Trust uses the profits from GK's commercial enterprises, including the pharmaceutical factory, to support the non-profit programmes. The organisation's management structure is illustrated in Figure 4.1. Separate commercial entities such as the printing press, the antibiotics division or the pharmaceutical factory are not included in this organogram.

There are clear lines of authority at the senior management level. The project coordinator, Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury, is responsible for all the commercial activities in Savar and the urban health programme in Dhaka, which forms part of the health section. The managing directors of the commercial enterprises and the executive director of GK are accountable to him. The executive director looks after all of GK's social development programmes and is in charge of the relief and rehabilitation programmes in Savar during disaster periods. At GK there are five major departments: health, construction, education, agriculture and credit cooperatives and Nari Kendra. Each individual department is headed by a programme director. The health section comprises a training division (training of paramedics), the rural health programme and the urban health programme. Nari Kendra deals with vocational training, marketing matters and adult education of the trainees. The metal, jute-plastic and carpentry workshops and GK's security guards fall under the construction section. For these vocations the head of Nari Kendra works together with the head of the construction department. Each individual training-cum-production unit of the vocational training centre is managed by a production unit head assisted by trainers and skilled workers. The trainers are responsible for both training and production of the units.
(Source: adapted from GK Report 1995)
Besides Savar and Dhaka there are ten other project locations, which are spread all over the country. One project director is responsible for each individual area. For a more efficient functioning of the social development programmes a project management committee has been formed consisting of all programme and project directors. This management committee is headed by the executive director. The project coordinator meets the committee every three months. The project management committee prepares a preliminary activity plan and budget and the executive and group finance directors draw up the final budget. The project coordinator approves the activities and budgets.

4.7 Empowerment and hierarchy

Maloney (1988:40) believes that in Bangladesh ‘[t]he principle of hierarchy in interpersonal relations is accepted as morally right and necessary’. It can depend on wealth, lineage, educational status, professional rank or age. He argues that throughout their history Bengalis have felt entitled to patronage. The person with the higher rank is considered to have the right to service and respect, but in return is expected to provide patronage. Wood (1994) hence concludes that the peasant’s expectation of being under the protection of the zamindars (large landowner) has now shifted to the government and NGOs.

Within this hierarchical and authoritarian structure, relationships of dependence and deference are widespread ... These patron-client relations are transferred into official organisations, despite any appearance of rational, bureaucratic and objective practices (Wood 1994a:549).

NGOs in Bangladesh have grown into a major force in development intervention. Most of them make strong claims about promoting women’s empowerment, but within the NGOs themselves patronage and vertical relationships have been noted (Devine 1996, Lovell 1992, White 1992b, Wood 1994b). This is hardly surprising considering that organisations tend to reflect the prevailing culture. GK is no exception. Like GK NGOs in Bangladesh often centre around a charismatic figure (usually male) who keeps close control over the activities of the organisation. Even though the organisation’s rhetoric in its development programmes may involve notions of participation and empowerment, internal
staff relations are often fairly rigid. The authority of the NGO leader is hardly ever questioned.

It is, however, extremely difficult for NGOs to break out of the patron role ... It may be, in fact, that the guarantee of a relationship with a strong and committed partner, which may serve as protection in crisis times ... is a key part of the appeal of NGOs for the poor (White 1992b:5).

Some even find that a certain amount of hierarchy is necessary for an organisation 'operating in a turbulent and often corrupt environment' in order to keep its stability (Lovell 1992:125). The fact that GK has survived various political turmoils including the 1990 crisis (see p. 89) is surely related to its strong charismatic leadership.

Are NGOs like GK hence becoming the new patrons of the poor? Are they turning into new patriarchs or 'public patriarchs', where the rule of the father or fathers is being reproduced by the rule of 'public men' or 'public institutions' where an 'extension of the public domains over the private domains' takes place (Hearn 1992:52, Brown 1981, Walby 1990, Nicholson 1992)? According to Hearn (1992) it is particularly organisations that are growing in size that tend to become more hierarchical and bureaucratic. Does this mean, however, that hierarchical structures will automatically lead to counterproductive outcomes in gender polices? Goetz (1995) refers to certain situations where hierarchical structures have actually had positive advantages over more participatory approaches. She therefore wonders whether hierarchical and bureaucratic structures are necessarily 'anti-ethical to gender-sensitive environments' and whether feminist institutions would be more 'participatory and inclusive' (Goetz 1995:8). Molyneux (1998:72), for example, argues that autonomous organisations are no guarantors for women's empowerment, because 'autonomy can in some contexts mean marginalisation and a reduced political effectiveness'.

At GK there is clearly a contrast between the egalitarian values promoted in its development programmes and the hierarchical structure at the top management decision-making level. The workers at GK do not 'own' the organisation and are not directly involved in top level decision-making as one would hope for in the ideal world of empowerment. Like the other NGOs, however, GK tries to minimise the negative aspects of hierarchy through mechanisms that portray the
more egalitarian values of the organisation's internal culture: As mentioned above, GK employs people from the grassroots in leadership positions. Everyone has to participate in the morning agricultural work. Various internal committees have been established at GK such as the Gonomess committee, the monthly meeting committee and the canteen committee, which follow the principle of rotation. There is a fairly low gap between the wages of top management and bottom-level workers and last, but not least, the lifestyle people lead at GK is so simple without any exclusive privileges for certain ranks.

In order to make management decisions transparent to the entire GK community including the commuting workers, regular meetings take place. Everyone participates in the monthly general meetings, where both female and male workers are particularly encouraged to express their needs and problems. I believe that the meetings are not showcase meetings held to impress donors or foreign researchers like me, but a genuine attempt to provide staff, workers and trainees with relevant information. They also allow for a more formal and extended dialogue between the various GK members than the one that already takes place daily due to the fact that people live together at GK. The organisation's communal lifestyle is a powerful tool for creating a sense of togetherness amongst its members. However, on the other hand, there also lies a danger within it: at GK the boundaries between work and leisure time have become so blurred that its staff had to cut down on their private lives in order to manage the enormous work pressure, which is increasing the more the organisation is growing.

4.8 Organisational growth and donor accountability

Like other big NGOs in Bangladesh GK is going through a process of scaling up. During this phase extremely high work demands and commitment are expected from both male and female staff, who end up being totally overburdened. The fact that staff are obliged to live on the GK campus means that they can be called to work in any emergency, stretching working hours. GK had particular difficulties in finding enough high-quality senior and mid-level staff to service its continuous expansion of programmes and locations.
This has led to senior staff being moved around to cope with the latest major area of work, with old areas of work left with insufficiently qualified staff, which in turn has resulted in structural changes to attempt to cope with this (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994:39).

GK also has a problem in finding the right people and keeping them. New staff appear less committed and dedicated and more detached from the post-liberation spirit of GK's founding days, resulting in a widening gap between the old guard and new recruits. Some of GK's rules from the early days and its original ideology might act as disincentives for new entrants. The rules include:

... no smoking, living residentially, eating in a common mess, doing an hour of agricultural work every morning, and working long and split hours (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994:47).

In order to overcome the general staff shortage GK is now encouraging its lower level staff to participate in higher education studies. Staff are given study leave for a maximum of two years with full pay. It is thereby hoped to develop new leadership capacities so that current staff can then be promoted to higher posts.

Operational expansion not only requires increased human, but also financial, resources. The bigger the NGO becomes the more support it will need from external donors. This leads to increased donor accountability. Specific programmes such as GK's education and health project, the para-medics training and the rehabilitation and refugee programme at Cox's Bazaar (see Plate 4.1) are supported by external donors including One World Action, World Food Programme, Christian Aid, Hong Kong Oxfam, Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), the European Commission, Sunrise Radio, Australian High Commission and private associations in France and Italy. The vocational training programme used to be funded by Christian Aid and the German Evangelical Centre for Development (EZE). Due to GK's lax reporting and accounting in the past, however, the funding for the vocational training centre has stopped. Now it receives donations from the GK Trust Fund and credit from GK bank. Forty eight per cent of its costs are covered by the sale of its products.
Recently, though, the situation appears to have improved significantly. GK has introduced a new monitoring and reporting system. Every three months the project managers have to submit a financial and written report of their activities to the executive director, who submits a financial and written report to the project coordinator twice a year. On the basis of this report an annual donor report is drawn up. GK's improved donor accountability might well lead to Christian Aid deciding to continue its funding for the vocational training centre.34

4.9 The vocational training centre for women

4.9.1 History and objectives

The vocational training centre for rural landless women was set up in 1973. The reasons for starting the vocational training centre were related to women's vulnerable position in society which was hindering their access to health services. The health needs of women and children were found to be inadequately met because women depended on a male family member to accompany them to the health centres and because they did not have their own money to spend. In addition to the generally bleak picture of women's health status in Bangladesh35 the health centre was confronted in its early days by several attempted suicides by married village women who could no longer cope with oppressive marriage situations. Without other options it is difficult for women to walk out of oppressive marriages. Thus, if the health programme was to achieve a lasting impact it would first have to assure women access to income and education.

GK followed the income-generation trend and opened a jute-handicrafts workshop in 1973. This was later recognised by GK to be an unsatisfactory approach to women's employment. On the one hand the market was unprofitable. The internal market was saturated with products appealing only to the few foreigners working in Bangladesh and westernised urbanites and exporting was risky and unpredictable due to rapidly changing trends. On the other hand handicrafts approaches did not offer women alternative roles and simply reproduced gender-stereotyped images of women and homemaking. GK therefore broke with
tradition and expanded into new areas of work from 1976 onwards. Various gendered vocational skills were introduced in the following years, for example, metalwork (welding, lathe operation and sheet bending) in 1976, carpentry and shoe-making in 1978, bakery and catering in 1979, fibre glass fabrication in 1982, blockprinting in 1984, professional driving in 1986, construction work in 1987, letter composition and printing in 1988 and irrigation pump operation, repair and maintenance in 1989. The idea was to aim at local markets and address local demand. Savar had a serious lack of trained carpenters, electricians and blacksmiths as much skilled labour had migrated to the Middle East.

Objectives of the vocational training programme

The aims of the vocational training programme, as stated by the programme personnel, are:

1. to offer women skills in non-traditional vocations
2. to increase women's confidence and self-respect
3. to improve their position in family and society
4. to make women economically independent
5. to demonstrate that, given the opportunity and right environment, women can contribute to the country's development
6. to raise women's literacy
7. to raise women's consciousness of issues affecting their lives.

(Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994)

GK is a pioneer in offering women training in non-traditional skilled manual and technical trades with the aim of achieving equality for women. The approach combines the improvement of women's material well-being with strategies for empowerment addressing women's practical as well as strategic needs. GK places great emphasis on demonstrating to women trainees and to society at large that women can perform roles other than those ascribed to them by society. It aims to challenge myths about what women can and cannot do. The adult education programme, a compulsory part of the vocational training, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.
4.9.2 Recruitment and organisation

The recruiting system for the vocational training centre has changed over the years. In the early days GK staff had to go to the nearby villages in search of women recruits. The women who came to GK in those days were predominantly Hindu, because they experienced slightly less restriction on their movements. The Muslim women who came had usually been abandoned by their husbands. Towards the 1980s more women came to GK through personal contacts. More married women began to come as well. GK became quite popular at that time and women came to hear about it through their own networks. Nowadays, if necessary, GK sends out circulars to village chairmen. As GK is becoming more commercial the focus now seems to be more on younger women, between 18 and 30 years of age (see Table 4.3), although priority is still given to women from poor backgrounds. However GK is now struggling to find the right balance between maintaining its self-reliance and being able to remain accountable to the people in need. On the one hand a certain degree of self-reliance means keeping productivity levels up. On the other hand older, abandoned, widowed and destitute women are the most vulnerable group who need to rely on a fallback possibility such as GK as they are not employable elsewhere.

The training period usually lasts two years. Every year approximately 100 women and men are trained on the job. Most of the participants (94%) are women (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994). The departmental supervisors are responsible for evaluating the trainee's learning process and ability. At the end of a year, supervisors, directors and senior workers discuss their progress. After the training the women get a certificate and either work for GK if there is a vacancy or leave the project to find work outside. Trainees start with a small allowance of Tk 100 per month plus free lunch, educational material and shelter if needed. After finishing the literacy course, which can last from six to ten months, the allowance rises to Tk 600 in the first year and Tk 700 in the second. Once women are regular employees at GK the average salary is Tk 1200. Depending on the time women spend at GK the salary can rise up to Tk 2000. GK's salary level is similar to that of other governmental and non-governmental programmes. A major advantage, compared with other NGO programmes, lies in the fact that the trainees and employees of the vocational training programme...
have a fixed income with special bonuses rather than being self-employed (Afsar 1990). Ideally each woman is supposed to get an increment of Tk 50 every year. However, the shortage of donor money means that GK has no extra budget for the vocational training programme. Increments therefore depend on profits. At the end of each year departmental supervisors and senior workers decide who merits an increment. This information is then passed on to the head of the vocational training programme who sees whether enough money is available before increments are confirmed by the executive director. After two years of employment ‘GK spirited’ women get a special increment, which increases according to time spent in GK. Then there are ‘good workers’ who are rewarded with an increment.38

4.9.3 Training and production

Table 4.1 is taken from a GK Report in 1986 listing the type of skills women on the training programme gain, production levels and markets for the products. The products are mainly marketed locally or have retail outlets in the capital. Some goods are exported to Europe. Major internal orders also come from GK and Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals Limited (GPL) for products such as uniforms, chairs, tables, hospital fittings and machines for the pharmaceutical factory. After 1986 GK expanded its training programme to include services such as driving, electrical work, plumbing, construction work.

Part of the original concept of the training programme was that once women had reached a sufficiently high level of skill, they should be encouraged to establish production units of three to ten women outside of the main centre. So far this goal has only been reached in one case, a handicrafts cooperative in Deposhai. It runs as a semi-independent cooperative with the woman in charge making production decisions under the ultimate direction of GK. Employment beyond the GK boundaries for women in the fields in which they were trained is the exception. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Five.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop</th>
<th>Production and markets</th>
<th>Skills training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sewing and tailoring</strong></td>
<td>Shirts, <em>sari</em> blouses, trousers, dresses, jackets, office uniforms. Orders from GK and GPL.</td>
<td>Measuring, fitting, cutting cloth, hand sewing, operating foot-treadle sewing machine. Mending, darning and alterations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laundry</strong></td>
<td>Local clients and GK staff and various departments in GK and GPL.</td>
<td>Washing (by hand), starching, pressing and ironing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sandal making</strong></td>
<td>For men, women and children. Local clients and large export orders.</td>
<td>Sandal making by hand, using leather, plastic, jute and rubber.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wood-block printing</strong></td>
<td>Bed sheets and covers, pillow cases, table cloths, printed <em>saris</em>. Local clients, retail outlets in Dhaka and export to Europe.</td>
<td>Traditional method of printing designs on cotton cloth. Method of making printed cloth colourfast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bakery</strong></td>
<td>Bread loaves and rolls, cakes and biscuits. Local market and retailed in Dhaka.*</td>
<td>Baking and confectionary. Quality control and packaging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metal workshop</strong></td>
<td>Chair, table and window frames, hospital fittings, agricultural equipment. Machines and machine parts. Local market and Dhaka. Machines for GPL.</td>
<td>Straightening, shaping and cutting rod and sheet metal using hand tools and work bench. Filing. Gas welding. Operation of electric drills, grinding and milling machines. Machine assembly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Carpentry</strong></td>
<td>Chairs, tables, bedsteads, cupboards, chests, agricultural equipment, doors, door frames. Local market.</td>
<td>Use of all basic hand tools of the trade in order to plain, saw and shape wood. Advanced skills involved in making joints. Finishing and decorative work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Printing Press</strong></td>
<td>Magazines, books, posters, leaflets and printed labels. Run by GK publications department.</td>
<td>Typesetting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: GK Report 1986
Note: * Since 1993, orders from the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) also
GK authorities are well aware of the lack of post-training support. In a recent proposal requesting funding for a large extension of Nari Kendra, GK envisioned a post-training placement facility. In addition GK was planning to expand the vocational training and production units in other areas. As far as self-employment is concerned GK was thinking of funding schemes such as ‘small workshops, home based production units and retail outlets for women's products, a tea shop and a mini-transport (tempo) service’. Unfortunately these visions seem to be kept on hold at the moment as the proposal was not fully funded due to GK’s problem with adequate reporting and accounting.

4.10 Gender dynamics at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

How far do the organisation’s feminist values match its actual behaviour? Although GK is not a feminist organisation per se and empowerment as such is not mentioned in GK’s written principles its approach to women has empowering elements. On the other hand NGOs like GK are subject to external and internal pressures which can hinder the process of empowerment: time constraints, accountability to donors, cultural norms, state interference and their own internal power structures and hierarchies. In her analysis of getting institutions right for women in development Goetz (1995, 1996b) points out that organisations' internal structures are gendered. NGOs can be gendered in their physical amenities and layout. Not all provide adequate toilet, housing and child care facilities for their female participants. Women's participation in NGOs can interfere with their private lives in terms of space and time management. NGOs can also be gendered in their management styles, ideologies and expressions of power and authority. GK has both positive and negative aspects regarding its potential to contribute to women’s empowerment.

4.10.1 Positive aspects

Feminist values are embedded in the organisation’s history and ideology. From the very beginning GK was concerned with the position of women in rural Bangladesh. The majority of participants in its para-medics and vocational
training programmes are women. The pharmaceutical factory was one of the first of its kind to employ predominantly women. The fact that most of GK's members are women creates a supportive environment for any female newcomer. Furthermore GK's general objectives and those of the vocational training centre incorporate feminist principles. The focus is not only economic well-being alone, but also on women's rights, education and self-awareness.

GK is not an organisation run exclusively by women, but women form a significant part of the management structure. Two out of the five programme directors and the personnel director are women. They have all been with GK from the very beginning and hold highly responsible jobs. Gita, who used to work at GK, was promoted several times. She started as a health worker in the paramedics programme when she was 19. In due time she became head of the pathology department in Savar and some years later director of the health project in Bhatasala, one of GK's subcentres.

When I worked in Bhatasala none of the decisions were made by Zafrullah. I made them all alone. I developed my own ideas. I discussed them with him and he agreed (Gita, former project director of GK Bhatasala).

According to Gita's account she was given the necessary authority to run her own project. She recalls that there were mostly women engaged in the project and that they would approach her with their personal problems when necessary:

Our target from the very beginning was that in all our projects 75 per cent of the employees should be women ... The women in my department could come to me with their personal problems. We also had weekly departmental group discussions ... Suppose a woman was beaten by her husband and the departmental head could not solve the problem alone the matter would be discussed in the meeting and if necessary we would also confront the woman's husband or her in-laws (Gita).

The way people work and live together at GK encourages the workers at GK to turn to their bosses with personal problems. In the case of the vocational training centre, for example, the former director even shared a room with one of the workers. The combined work and living space at GK not only allows for such informal accommodation arrangements, but also has the advantage of alleviating some of the women's domestic and reproductive burden. GK provides housing, food and child care facilities.
As an employer GK offers a good deal. Besides having a regular income each woman has access to her own bank account, medical services and schooling for herself and her children. After two years women get life insurance and after four a deposit pension scheme. GK's child care centre currently takes care of 26 children of its female workers. Women get time off at work for breastfeeding. Employees are entitled to two months' paid maternity leave, one month with half pay and three unpaid months. If a woman has worked for five years without having become pregnant she gets four months' paid leave.

4.10.2 Negative aspects

Women appreciate the work at GK for its regular income and the various fringe benefits. However, salaries at GK can also be cut, if a worker does not comply with the rules, for example by not attending meetings regularly or missing out on the agricultural morning work. Working in GK requires discipline and commitment. Once you have signed an employment contract you commit yourself to staying with GK for at least three years. GK demands an enormous amount of flexibility as to when and where women work. During disaster relief periods, for example, GK's expectations of all its members are at their highest. Workers are expected to be available at all times, regardless of whether they are male or female. They have to be prepared to leave their homes and families behind for an unspecified period of time. Often they are sent to remote areas for relief work. Hence GK also interferes in women's private lives significantly. The experience of being personally responsible for helping other people in emergency times is undoubtedly extraordinary and highly rewarding. Nevertheless GK's expectations are rather unusual, in particular for women with family responsibilities.

GK not only interferes in women's family lives, but also in their sexual lives. Couples may end up living separately because they work in different places. When husbands come to visit they usually have to stay in a guest room. Women's sexuality is controlled as trainees are encouraged not to become pregnant and unmarried women are not supposed to get involved with male co-workers during the training period. Internal GK marriages happen, but in order to avoid trouble with the village communities GK expects the couple to ask their parents for
GK demands an even higher commitment from its staff. Male staff are as overburdened with work as female staff, but in some cases the consequences for female staff are worse. They end up sacrificing more of their family lives than men do. Most of the wives of the married male staff at GK also live with their husbands at GK. In the case of some of the female staff members, however, the husbands work in Dhaka. As staff members are obliged to live in the GK campus, those couples can only see each other at the weekends. It seems therefore that to sustain a healthy family life both partners should be working at GK. The situation is particularly bad for some of the senior female staff, who have been with GK since its origins. They seem to have entirely missed the opportunity to create their own family. In a sense they got married to the organisation. They joined GK as very young women and never left.

In the next section I will describe the background of the women who came to work at GK's vocational training centre.

4.11 Profile of the women workers

In February/March 1995 I conducted a questionnaire survey in GK with 127 out of 144 women (88 per cent) currently working in various departments of the vocational training centre at Savar. I employed Bengali friends as a research team consisting of four men and two women. Seventeen women were not surveyed because of illness, pregnancy or temporary absence. For logistical reasons I conducted the survey entirely in the main centre at Savar, where the women's project is based, not including workers in the subcentres.41

In the following section I present a brief profile of the women currently engaged in GK. This will place the core interview group of 30 women in the wider context of the overall organisation.
4.11.1 Personal background

About 60 per cent of the women working in GK are from the Savar and Dhamrai area, often from villages where GK has a health post. The remaining 40 per cent come from other areas. When asked whether the current place the women were living was their original village most said they had moved from their home villages at one point. Some women originally came from districts near Savar, such as Maniganj, Comilla, Faridpur and Tangail. Floods and loss of land due to river erosion were common reasons for their migration. In some of these cases the women had already migrated with their parents. Most women had migrated to find work. Some women had GK particularly in mind when looking for work. These women came from villages within the Savar district but had decided to move to villages that were closer to GK.

Table 4.2 Reasons for Migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To get work</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be with husband</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be with family/relatives</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=81

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995

Table 4.3 indicates that about two thirds of the women currently engaged at GK are young, falling into the 15-30 age group. The intake of the latest trainees, from 1993 or thereafter, shows a complete absence of women older than 35. Table 4.3 and discussions with GK personnel suggest that this reflects a deliberate policy of involving younger women, preferably in the 15-30 age group, in its vocational training programme, in order to enable GK to compete with the garment industries and the EPZ.
Two thirds of the women working at GK had the status of an employee. They have passed the two-year training period and are now employed at GK. The remaining one third are still trainees.

Women who came to GK in the early 1970s were basically illiterate. A survey undertaken by GK in 1972 for the two unions Dhamsona and Pathalia, showed that 78 per cent of the men and 92 per cent of the women could not read or write. Ten per cent of the population attended class 1-5, but spot tests showed that out of these four-fifths could not read functionally and one-half could only write their own name. Hence, only five per cent of the population were truly literate (GK Report 1972/73). According to the Bangladesh Population Census, literacy rates overall in the Dhamsona Union have risen from 10.3 per cent in 1974 to 37.1 per cent in 1991 and about every fourth woman in that area is now literate (Table 4.4).
Table 4.4 Population, households and literacy rates in Dhamsona Union

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Households</th>
<th>Literacy Total %</th>
<th>Literacy male %</th>
<th>Literacy female %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>16,495</td>
<td>2,651</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>33,626</td>
<td>6,310</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Bangladesh Population Census 1974 and 1991

Table 4.5 indicates where the women at GK received their education.

Table 4.5 Education of women at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In GK only</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before GK</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before GK and in GK</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=117</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995

Table 4.6 Educational status of women at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Woman at GK Percentage</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can sign only</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 1 - 5</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 6 - 10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Only ten of the women surveyed are illiterate. Half the women in the survey were already educated before coming to GK. Most women are now educated to primary level (class five). More than a quarter of the women at GK have now entered secondary and higher levels of education (see Table 4.6). Quite often women's educational status exceeded that of their husbands. This suggests a shift in women's access to education, which is related to the rise in governmental and non-governmental rural development works, targeted particularly at women. According to the Bangladesh National Report (1995) the increase in overall literacy rates for the country was more rapid for women compared to men over the period 1985-1991, with present literacy rates being 45 per cent for men and 24 per cent for women.

4.11.2 Household profile

Whereas it was mainly Hindu or deserted Muslim women who worked at GK in the early 1970s, the women workers nowadays are predominantly Muslim and as Table 4.7 shows almost half of them are currently married. One quarter of the married women got married after they had joined GK. Another quarter are unmarried and approximately a third are divorced, separated or abandoned women or widows.

Table 4.7 Marital status of women at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/separated (Woman left man)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/separated/abandoned (Man left woman)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=127

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Table 4.8 Age at marriage of ever-married women at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Percentage of all women</th>
<th>Percentage of women below 30</th>
<th>Percentage of women above 30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 - 12*</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 15**</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 - 20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=95</td>
<td>n=62</td>
<td>n=33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Notes: * before first period
** shortly after first period

Table 4.8 illustrates the women’s age on marriage. The majority of women who were currently married or had at some point been married, had married between the ages of 13 and 15. The second largest group had married even earlier, pre-puberty. Several women were married at the age of six or seven years. The oldest marriage age in the sample was 25 years. My assumption had been that the younger generation - *i.e.* women below 30 years old - would have married later and the older generation - those over 30 - would have been married at an earlier age, mostly below 15. My findings, however, show that most women from both generations still married before they were 15. Nonetheless, whilst 70 per cent of the older women had married below the age of 15 and only 18 per cent after they were 15, about half of the younger women married below 15 and the other half after. About ten per cent of the younger generation women married quite late by Bangladeshi standards *i.e.* after the age of 20.

Table 4.9 shows that the majority of the unmarried women are between 16 and 18 years of age. Some said they came to GK specifically in order to delay marriage.


### Table 4.9 Age of currently unmarried women at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 18</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 - 20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 25</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 28</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=28

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995

Note: Four women are handicapped and believed they will never get married. They are therefore not included in this table.

About one fifth of the currently married women have to live apart from their husbands for work reasons, which is quite unusual in Bangladesh. In two cases the married couple live separately because the husband stays with his second wife. Polygamy is still fairly common in the villages and is the major reason for divorce or separation in my sample. The husbands had either kicked their wives out immediately after they re-married or had driven them out little by little by abusing them. Often the new wives acted as oppressors as well. Other reasons for separation or divorce cited in my survey were dowry problems, domestic violence, not having children (in particular no male children) or the husband's incapacity to take adequate care of the family. In my survey there were six cases where the husbands of currently married women had a second wife and 23 women were abandoned or had left their husbands for that reason. None of the abandoned or divorced women ever married again.

Seventy-five per cent of the women who were or had been married had children. In most cases, 65 per cent, the children remained with the mother (Table 4.10). If the children are not with the mother they tend to be taken care of by her parents or stay with relatives. In some cases the children are with the father.
Table 4.10 Gonoshasthaya Kendra workers’ children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With mother*</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not with mother</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, but no children</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was married, no children</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=95

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Note: * includes one case where one child is with the mother and the other child with relatives of the father

Table 4.11 Place of residence of workers at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of residence</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman lives in a ‘mess’ arrangement inside GK*</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman and her husband live together inside GK</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman lives outside GK in a nuclear or extended household**</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman lives outside GK alone or with her children***</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=127

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Notes: * includes where husband lives separately due to job elsewhere
** includes women with married children and those sharing with other relatives
*** includes cases where husband lives apart from his wife because of his job or a second marriage (i.e. husband lives in house of second wife, but still sees first wife occasionally)
GK offers housing facilities to women in need of shelter. Twenty-three per cent of the women surveyed lived inside the GK campus (Table 4.11). A handful lived in GK with their husband who also worked there. The others shared a room with female co-workers in the GK hostel. Room-sharing with other non-family related women is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. ‘Messing’ (sharing a room in a ‘mess’ i.e. hostel) is becoming more and more common amongst the garment workers and means that now women are ‘choosing to form residential units which [are] not organised around a male guardian’ (Kabeer 1995b:29). The majority (77 per cent), however, commuted daily between GK and their homes in the villages.

Table 4.12 indicates that 58 per cent of the survey households were nuclear.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of household</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear*</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended**</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Notes: * single woman or couple with or without children (includes the cases where women share rooms with other women, but form separate households)
** includes relatives and married children (includes one case where second wife is living in same house)

The high figure of nuclear households amongst the GK women confirms the general trend to increased nuclearisation (Adnan 1989, Begum and Shamim 1993, Hossain et al. 1991, Kochendoerfer-Lucius and Osner 1992, Mizan 1994, Westergaard 1991, White 1992). According to Adnan (1989) 52.2 per cent of all households in Bangladesh in 1982 were nuclear units. As table 4.13 shows the majority (46 per cent) of the nuclear households are single women with or without children. Forty-three per cent are couples, although 11 per cent of the couples do not live together either for work reasons or the fact that the husband lives with his second wife. These are de facto single headed households.
Table 4.13 Nature of nuclear household of Gonoshasthaya Kendra workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Nuclear Household</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single woman*</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single woman and children**</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple and children</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple, no children</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple live separately, children***</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple live separately, no children***</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=74

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Notes: By ‘single women’ I mean women currently not married (either never married or now abandoned).
* includes sharing with cousin
** includes five cases where children live with relatives and not with the mother
*** couple live separately for work reasons or because husband lives with second wife

Table 4.14 breaks down extended households into various complex categories. The largest group (43 per cent) of the women living in extended households consists of women without a spouse living with their parents or their brothers. The second largest group comprises women without a spouse living with dependants (19 per cent). Dependent family members include, for example, the woman's parents or younger siblings. Very few couples lived with the parents and in a few cases the couple lives with another dependent family member. More single women than couples are supporting dependent family members (19 per cent and 11 per cent respectively).
Table 4.14 Nature of extended household of Gonoshasthaya Kendra
workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Household</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman living at her parents/brothers</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman and dependent family members</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple at woman’s parents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple at man’s parents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple and dependent family member</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman with others*, husband lives separately due to job</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=53

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995
Note: * e.g. own parents, in-laws or relatives

4.11.3 Poverty profile

In Bangladesh landholdings are highly fragmented. White (1992) refers to the 1978 Land Occupancy survey, which found that about 80 per cent of landholdings were below two acres and that the average plot covered only 0.15 acres. Rahman’s (1994) national base-line sample of 1,265 households in 62 villages undertaken in 1993 shows the situation has hardly changed. Eighty-one per cent of landholdings in his sample are below 250 decimal.44 In Table 4.15 I compare Rahman’s results with the landownership of the families of the women at GK. The land was usually owned by a male member of the family: either father, husband or brother. A few of the women at GK, however, possessed their own land (see Table 4.16). I used Rahman’s (1994) categorisation for land ownership distinguishing between landless (0-4 decimal) and functionally landless (5-49 decimal). Amongst the NGOs, poverty is usually defined by landlessness. The NGOs’ categorisation of poverty includes the functionally landless i.e. those households owning below 50 decimal i.e. half an acre (Mizan 1994, White 1991:5). Table 4.15 shows that the percentage of extreme poor in GK (51 per cent) is
higher than in Rahman's national base-line survey, where landless and functionally landless households comprise only 45 per cent of the sample. The next biggest group in GK are households of marginal farmers (18 per cent) with landholdings between 50 and 149 decimal. Whereas the functionally landless do not own enough land to make a living of it (status of chronic deficit), marginal farmers consider the amount of land they own as land they can still live on, but they are also vulnerable to land loss (status of occasional deficit) (see Figure 4.2). Rahman (1994) calls these the moderate poor.

Table 4.15 Land ownership of Gonoshasthaya Kendra workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landless (0-4)**</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionally landless (5-49)***</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal (50-149)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (150-249)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (250-499)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (500)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=127</td>
<td>n=127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: * 1 acre is about 120 decimal
** no cultivable land including cases with only homestead land
*** households with fragmentary landholdings
Figure 2. Average household landholding (1990 - 1993)


119a
As one can see in Table 4.15 the degree of poverty in terms of landownership is not homogeneous. The categories of poverty include landless, functional landless, and marginal or small farmers. Table 4.15 also shows that not all the women working at GK are from a poor background. A few women come from middle and large landholding families. Table 4.16 shows that 17 per cent of the women working at GK have their own land i.e. land in their name. Some of the women inherited land from their fathers. Others have bought their own land with the money they earned at GK.

Table 4.16 Landholding of women working at Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landholding in decimal</th>
<th>Women owning land (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No land</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 40</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 - 200</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 200</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of GK employees, 1995

4.12 Conclusion

In this chapter I have set the context for my study of women's daily empowerment practices. Gonoshasthaya Kendra is a Bangladeshi development organisation concerned with women's position in society. Although not a feminist organisation GK follows the goal of women's empowerment. It provides women with education, work and training opportunities and, for those who need it, an alternative home. Furthermore women are given their own space for building up alternative support networks. However, the women do not 'own' GK. They are
not actively involved in decision-making processes on higher management levels as in self governed autonomous women's organisations. Still, through their involvement with GK - both at work and in their social lives - women are gaining greater autonomy.

GK's approach is radical as it demands women to leave stereotypical behavioural norms behind. The women are encouraged to speak up in organisational meetings. They are confident to approach the directors with their needs and problems. The relationship between the management and the organisation's members is fairly open. Complaints are taken seriously. The women show their respect to the directors, but do not behave in a deferential way (as I will be illuminating in the empirical chapters, for example, by the way they hold their bodies when speaking to the authorities). GK is an extremely unusual NGO. Set within a rural Bangladeshi culture it places very high demands on the women engaged with the organisation. As a result women find themselves in a situation where they have to balance between the two conflicting expectations of cultural propriety and GK work culture. In the empirical chapters I will investigate how women deal with these two conflicting demands and the multiple roles they learn to adopt during this process.

Notes

1. About eighty per cent of pregnant women in South Asia suffer from anaemia, reputedly the highest rate in the world (Atkins et al. 1997, UNDP 1995).

2. Ahmed and Naher (1987:54) report that in some areas in Bangladesh purdah used to be so strict that a woman had to wrap up her entire body in a mat if she had to leave the house.

3. A woman's status rises within the family with age and birth of her children. The life cycle of a woman is completed with the entrance of the daughter-in-law to whom she will allocate specific household chores and over whom she has a certain degree of authority (Chaudhury and Ahmed 1980).

4. Purdah is a status symbol for women from higher classes as it demonstrates the family's wealth. The family can afford to live on the male breadwinner's income alone.

5. See also Jeffery et al. (1989) on perceptions of male and female sexuality.

6. I had cases where the husband was twenty years older.

7. This was the general perception Elahi encountered on the issue of marriage age in her study villages.

9. The Comilla project by Akhter Hameed Khan was the dominant model in rural development in Bangladesh since the 1960s and was replicated by the national Intensive Rural Development Programme in 1972. It consisted of farmers' cooperatives and promoted new intensive farming techniques and 'green revolution' technologies. The project, however, failed to maintain equality amongst the cooperative members as they were soon dominated by the village elites (Devine 1996, White 1991, Wood 1994a).

10. The concept of 'civil society' is eclectic and amorphous. Its applicability to Bangladesh is therefore problematic. Recent debates focus on the role NGOs play in this context. For a critical view on 'good governance' and 'civil society' see, for example, Devine (1996, 1998), Goetz and O'Brien (1995), White (1992b), Wood (1994a, 1994b), Wood and Davis (1998). During my fieldwork in Bangladesh I observed an unexplored perspective, which emerged from Dhaka-based, middle class academics, journalists, lawyers and certain business groups, who also claim to be promoters of civil society.

11. The notion of the 'weak state' as defined by Migdal is the incapacity to 'regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate or use resources in determined ways' (Migdal 1984:4, cited in Devine 1998). It has been applied to Bangladesh by Crow (1990), Devine (1996, 1998), Lewis (1997) and White (1996).


14. A recent study by Rashid and Shahabuddin (1996) describes two cases where Proshika has helped people challenge local structures. One is about people fighting local elites against deforestation (in this context see also Lewis 1992, Khan et al. 1993). The other case describes female slum dwellers organising themselves to resist exploitation by 'mastaans' (thugs, in this context slum mafia). See also Huda (1989) on people's resistance against landowners.

15. Women learned how to maintain their accounts as they had been cheated in the Food for Work programmes.

16. 'Khas' land (government land) was promised to the landless people free of cost shortly after independence. This land distribution has proven to be far more difficult than expected as powerful groups tend to claim the land for themselves. See Westergaard (1994) on this issue.

17. The majority of shrimp fields are owned by outsiders and rich landowners and about ten per cent by small and marginal farmers (Datta 1994). The rich shrimp cultivators tend to maximise their profit via expansion, which is achieved often through coercion. In Datta's study there was a 'high correlation between sale of land by lower landowning category households and non-receiving of rent from the shrimp cultivators for the use of their land'.

18. After having left the field I have later heard that Saptogram and GSS no longer exist.

19. Shamittees are group formations at the village level.

20. Bangladesh is divided into districts and these, in turn are divided into subdivisions. A subdivision splits into thanas (literally: police station) and thanas into unions. A union consists of several villages.
21. Nizam, the paramedic-in-charge of one of GK's subcentres, was murdered in 1976 when he found out about the illegal activities of a group of wealthy people in that village.

22. GK has been given the land holdings in Savar and other nearby areas by local supporters. These donations have had an influence on the location of the main health centre and its local subcentres.


24. Ray (1986) refers to the common practice of *bazaar* doctors working hand in hand with rich farmers. By overpricing and cheating the poor in cases of illness they forced many people into selling off their assets and finally their land in order to cover their medical expenses. The rich farmers were then able to buy the land without difficulty.

25. Hours and Selim (1989) quote the figure of one doctor to 30,000 people.


27. For a detailed description of GK's role in Bangladesh's National Drug Policy see Chowdhury (1995).

28. Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals produces high quality, but low-cost essential drugs. It was the first factory of its kind to open up many new job opportunities mainly targeted at women.

29. For detailed information on GK's role in Bangladesh's National Drug Policy see Chowdhury (1995).

30. See Stewart and Taylor (1995) and their example of working with the police in Zimbabwe when dealing with domestic violence.

31. There are three salary levels (Garilao and Luz n.d.):
   - **bottom:** Taka 600 - 2,000
   - **middle:** Taka 1,500 - 2,500
   - **top:** Taka 2,000 - 3,000.

32. Sondha Roy, former director of Nari Kendra and now in charge of the Cox's Bazaar programme, was always so extremely busy during her short visits to Savar centre that we ended up having our interview at midnight once.


35. These include: lower life expectancy rate for women; high maternal mortality rate due to early childbearing and frequent pregnancies; female malnutrition resulting from biased food allocation; gender discrimination in access to health care (Atkins *et al.* 1997, Chen *et al.* 1981, Kabeer 1989a, World Bank 1997).

36. GK staff, personal communication, 1995.

37. For comparison, see, for example:
   - **BRAC:** Women involved in the BRAC *nakshi kantha* centres (sewing and embroidery work) earn an average income of about Tk 500-600 per month and BRAC carpentry trainees about Tk 500 per month (Huda and Hossain 1994).
   - **Proshika:** At Proshika a tailor earns about Tk 1000 per month (Rashid and Shahabuddin 1996). **Factory work:** In the garment factories female helpers earn between Tk 500-600 per month, female ironers about Tk 800-900 per month and female machine operators about Tk 2,500-3,000.
1000 per month (Bangladesh National Report 1995). In Hossain, Jahan and Sobhan's (1990) study women working in jute and textile industries earned between Tk 300-1500 per month. **Urban informal sector:** The mean income of women employed in work such as grinding spices, carrying water, sweeping, winnowing, canteen work, sewing, jute bag making, domestic work and brick breaking was Tk 339 per month according to Salahuddin and Shamim (1992).

38. The terms 'GK spirited' and 'good workers' were used in this context in a conversation with a GK staff member, 1995. A 'good worker' is, for example, someone who donates blood voluntarily.

39. The post-training placement facility consisted of an internship programme with small scale manufacturing units, waged jobs in industrial units and self-employment in cooperative enterprises. The internship programme was targeted at the public sector *i.e.* industries that were not meeting the national 15 per cent *quota* for female employment. Skilled GK women could then be placed in those industries. GK would provide free technical assistance in setting up low cost health and child care services. For waged jobs in the private sector the placement unit was supposed to act as a job information service providing lists of firms and businesses willing to cooperate. (GK proposal paper to Christian Aid, 1991).


41. In the survey I have not included 11 female drivers in Cox's Bazaar, three women working in the handicrafts cooperative in Deposhai and 36 women weavers working in Jamalpur. I decided not to include any of the women weavers from Deposhai as they are working in a separate project and almost form a separate unit that has little to do with the community in the Savar project. I have, however, undertaken qualitative in-depth interviews with female drivers as well as the woman in charge of the handicrafts cooperative in Deposhai.

42. In my questionnaire survey of 1995 I counted about 35 different villages women came from within the Savar and Dhamrai area.

43. In this and all subsequent tables, where the total is not 100 per cent, this is due to rounding to the nearest integer.

44. One acre equals approximately 120 decimal.
Chapter Five: Socio-economic dimensions of empowerment

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines socio-economic changes in women’s lives when entering waged work. After a brief review of the debate on whether or not women are liberated through waged work I describe the background to women’s recent entry into the labour market in Bangladesh. I then discuss the reasons women gave for choosing to work at GK rather than elsewhere. The following section presents GK as a place that offers women work and explains how GK differs from normal employers and most other NGOs by challenging gender stereotyped notions of women’s capacities and roles in Bangladeshi society.

As 83 per cent of the women surveyed came to GK without prior formal work experience their initial feelings of fear and doubt together with their ways of adapting to the new work experience are then discussed. In this context women’s negotiations with their families over their new work identities and the contradictions they experience within this process of change will be analysed. The interviews lead me to believe that most women’s perception of work, themselves and their environment had been transformed. The chapter concludes with a critical evaluation of women’s limited employment chances beyond the organisation, but suggests that there is more to GK’s empowerment approach than purely economic aspects.

5.2 Entering men’s spaces and doing their work

In the gender and development literature one assumption that was shared by modernisation and Marxist theorists was that women’s liberation could be achieved through their participation in waged work. The 1970s WID approach influenced by Boserup’s (1970) book on how women had been excluded from economic development focused on integrating women into mainstream development through income generation schemes. It was believed that women’s entry into the public world of work would lead to equality with men. By coming
out of their homes and entering public spaces - spaces generally occupied by men - women would also, it was thought, become more visible. Development projects were therefore bringing women into work schemes, but in activities male planners had regarded as 'suitable' for women. This can be seen in the overwhelming number of handicrafts programmes established in the 1970s and 1980s; such programmes are still popular today.

Towards the 1980s export-oriented industrialisation succeeded in bringing an enormous number of women out of their homes and into the labour market, particularly in South East Asia and Central America (Pearson 1998). However, it did not end women's subordination. On the contrary, some even described its impact on women's lives as exploitative (Beneria and Sen 1981, Elson and Pearson 1981, McCarthy and Feldman 1983, Mies 1986). Women had entered the public world of men, but instead of becoming equal partners they were still performing different tasks from men, they did not have the same training and promotion possibilities and were usually paid less (Edgren 1982, Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983, Humphrey 1985, Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983). As regards the handicrafts projects in development planning women were no longer physically confined to their homes, but still ended up being 'domesticated' in so-called 'special projects', which would involve western stereotyped 'feminine' activities like sewing, knitting and doll-making (Rogers 1980). As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two the involvement of women in 'non-traditional' work was therefore seen as an alternative to programmes that were merely extending women's domestic roles. The idea of training women in new skills such as masonry or carpentry, in other words areas traditionally associated with men, was aimed at widening women's job opportunities and countering the existing sex segregation within the labour market (Moser 1991, Rogers 1980). The emphasis of such a strategy, however, was still on women's equality with men, on women becoming as good as men in the market place. The fact that men should become as good as women and learn to demonstrate 'feminine' qualities of caring and nurturing was overlooked (Eisenstein 1984, Goetz 1997, Kabeer 1994). Later shifts in development policies from WID to GAD were followed by a move in feminist theory from equality to difference. Not only were women and 'feminine' values perceived as different from men and 'masculine' values, but the stress on difference also included differences amongst women themselves. Former
universal notions of the category of women were deconstructed and rejected for their implicit ethnocentricity:

our point of departure was that the relations between men and women are social and therefore not immutable and fixed. The form that gender relations take in any historical situation is specific to that situation and has to be constructed inductively; it cannot be read off from other social relations nor from the gender relations of other societies (Pearson et al. 1984 cited in Jackson and Pearson 1998:3).

In other words, gender relations are shaped in the contexts of both time and place. In this chapter my interest lies in how women’s engagement with GK has influenced existing gender relations. The individual women’s experiences with GK are placed within the historical and cultural background of women’s recent entry into the labour market in Bangladesh.

5.3 Women’s participation in the labour market in Bangladesh

In recent years an increased percentage of women entering the labour market has been noted in Bangladesh. This trend has been related to push and pull factors. Women have been pushed into the labour market in response to a combination of forces such as increased poverty, land fragmentation and landlessness. The literature describes a shift from subsistence to market-oriented production and a stagnant rural agricultural labour market. Afsar (1990), for example, refers to the Agricultural Sector Review of 1989 which foresees that only approximately 30 per cent of the population can be absorbed in the agricultural sector in the future. Many poor women, who used to perform traditional tasks such as rice milling, have been displaced as a result of technological change. The erosion of family networks is also significant in this context (Kabeer 1985, van Schendel 1986, Westergaard 1983). Van Schendel describes ‘household splitting’ as a survival strategy of the ‘economically-stronger household members’. According to Kabeer:

[c]hanging relations in the wider economy have led to a change in relations within the family system [and they have] set in motion the gradual dissolution of old forms of family organisation among landless peasants, and ... eroded traditional systems of support ... [This] has left women (and children) particularly vulnerable since
Pull factors are related to the process of urbanisation and industrialisation. For example, Savar, the area where the case study organisation GK is located, has been booming over the past ten years, changing from a rural background into a semi-urban industrial zone. The peak of industrialisation and urbanisation was during the 1980s when many new industries sprang up such as pharmaceutical, garment, glass, brick, ceramic and shoe factories, textile mills, leather, dyeing, printing and construction industries (Hossain et al. 1990). These new employment opportunities drew an industrial workforce into the area, many of them migrants from other districts. With its close proximity to Dhaka, Savar has also attracted many governmental and non-governmental organisations, bringing a variety of income-generation opportunities as well as education programmes to the surrounding villages. The 1980s was also the time of the big credit push. Credit provision schemes like that of Grameen Bank became all the rage amongst NGOs as well as donors. Consequently, families started to realise that women represented a good source for access to credit and income.

In line with the shift in national policies towards trade liberalisation and export orientation in the past two decades, export promotion measures have also been taken. The setting up in 1993 of an Export Processing Zone in Dhamsona Union, had a huge impact on the surrounding villages. Its 'proximity to rural areas' - according to a BIDS Evaluation Report on the Export Processing Zone - 'has made room for drawing upon abundant low-cost labour' (BIDS 1994:19).
5.4 Women's reasons for seeking work in Gonoshasthaya Kendra

According to Kabeer (1995b) earlier accounts on women and work concentrated mainly on the impact of waged work on the household and failed to include a discussion of women's personal motivations for deciding to go to work outside the home. She stresses the fact that negotiations with others had to take place before women entered the formal work space. In her study of first generation garment workers most women had ‘initiated’ (Kabeer 1995b:33) the work process themselves and some had done so in opposition to their guardians. This therefore already reflects choices women had taken before even starting with income earning activities. As table 5.1 shows, the vast majority of women (88 per cent) came to GK for economic survival reasons. Two of them stated explicitly that there were no other job opportunities. A handful came in order to delay or escape marriage (three per cent), and some women said they wanted to become independent. A few mentioned that their husbands were working in GK and would not want their wives to work somewhere else, while four per cent stated that working at GK enabled them to be independent in the sense of having their own income. In six cases (four per cent) the women had either had connections with GK since their childhood or had come to the organisation because they were disabled but knew that, unlike other employers, GK would not discriminate against them.

Table 5.1 Women's reasons for seeking work in Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For economic survival purposes</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To delay or escape marriage</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To become economically independent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because they have had connections with GK since childhood</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because they are disabled</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study
Like the women working in a garment industry who were studied by Kabeer (1995b), most of the women (76 per cent) claimed they themselves had decided to enter wage employment as demonstrated in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2 Who took decision for the woman to come to Gonoshasthaya Kendra?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision taken by:</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The woman herself</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's husband</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both the woman and her husband</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's parents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (brothers, relatives)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study

It was therefore not surprising that 70 per cent of the women in this questionnaire survey had not faced any particular objection from their families (see Table 5.3).

**Table 5.3 Who objected to the woman going to work at Gonoshasthaya Kendra?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objections from:</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nobody</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's husband</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's father</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's mother</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's husband and his family</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (relatives, neighbours, villagers)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study
Those who had met objections (38 women) had been told that they should not work outside the home as it would bring disgrace on the family (55 per cent) and that working women would neglect children and housework (eight per cent) (Table 5.4). Furthermore their security and chastity would be in danger (11 per cent). Unmarried women were told they should get married. Five per cent of the families feared that women would become too independent.

**Table 5.4 Reason for objection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work outside the house brings disgrace to the family</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women working will neglect housework and children</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of security as GK is too far from home</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women should get married</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women should not become too independent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=38

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study

Table 5.5 demonstrates that one third of the women (34 per cent) reacted to these family objections by simply ignoring them. Others stressed the benefits of work or the lack of other earners in their families (see Table 5.5). In some cases other family members supported the women by helping to convince those opposing their working at GK (*e.g.* a woman's father might convince the father-in-law or her mother or sister might help convince the father or brother) (see Table 5.6).
Table 5.5 How women overcame objections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women ignored objections</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women convinced their families of the benefits of working at GK</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women argued that work guarantees a better future</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women argued that there was no other male earner in the family</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women were supported in their decision by other family members</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=38

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study

Table 5.6 Who supported the women in their decision to work at Gonoshasthaya Kendra?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nobody</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband and his family</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone from GK</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (neighbours, relatives, villagers)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=127

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study
In the case of married women only a few of the husbands (seven per cent) had initially objected, as Table 5.3 shows. In general, however, their extreme poverty meant that husbands could not really afford to object to their wives working. About one third of the husbands of the 56 currently-married women did not have regular jobs, reflecting the stagnant rural labour market. This suggests a situation where men are losing the opportunity to be adequate breadwinners, whereas an increasing number of women are entering a market which presents new work opportunities for them. This may well lead to circumstances where women find themselves performing new roles. The situation, however, is ambiguous, as on the one hand new roles for women may be created, but on the other hand old roles may also be reinforced (see the vast literature on the internationalisation of labour). How women deal with these ambiguities and how leaving their homes and working in GK affects their lives is discussed in the later sections.

The type of women participating in formal employment has changed remarkably within the last twenty years. Whereas it was mainly widows and abandoned women who were involved in formal employment outside the homestead in the 1970s (Chen and Ghuznavi 1977, Islam, M. 1975, Kabeer 1995b, Khan 1992, McCarthy et al. 1979, White 1992) now one can also see married and unmarried women in the labour market. Staff members at GK remember the early days (the early 1970s) when it was mainly women who had been deserted who would come to the organisation and GK staff were going out to the villages trying to convince the guardians to let women come to GK. In the 1980s the situation began to change as more women (not only abandoned women) began to approach the agency themselves. Table 4.7 (see Chapter Four) shows the marital status of the women currently involved in GK according to the results of the survey undertaken in 1995. In 1995 married women formed the largest group (44 per cent). Thirty one per cent are divorced, abandoned or widows and twenty-five per cent are unmarried.

Although the majority of women surveyed were driven to work by economic necessity and came from the ranks of the poorest, they by no means represented a homogenous group. Economic survival and the concept of poverty as such are broad categories which have to be deconstructed. Both the survey and the in-
depth interviews suggested a wide range of possible motivations for women coming to GK. The need to ensure survival is a constant background theme, but there are still differences according to women’s particular class and socio-economic backgrounds, life-cycles and positions in the household. I have classified the women in this case study into the following groups. The groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

a) No male earner in the household and relatives are too poor to help

One such group was made up of women who were the sole earners in their household. They usually represent the poorest segment of women at GK. These are the so-called female-headed households using Kabeer’s (1989) definition of female-headed households where women are either abandoned, separated, divorced, widowed or unmarried without an adult male breadwinner supporting themselves and their dependants [e.g. children, siblings, parents, sick or unemployed husbands]. These women have no choice but to work for their living. There is no (or not sufficient) external help available. Quite often these women had already worked for money or food before coming to GK. Their previous employment was usually in domestic service, homebased activities such as poultry raising, making fishnets or rice processing, or the garments industry (see Tables 5.7 and 5.8).

Table 5.7 What did women do before coming to Gonoshasthaya Kendra?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paid work</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study
Table 5.8 Type of paid work before coming to Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paid work before GK</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homebased work</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in other NGOs</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic service</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garments factory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study

b) No male earner in the household but limited help from parents/relatives

Unlike the first group these women had the option of relying on their relatives’ support, but no longer wanted to be a burden to others. These women were now either self-supporting and living on their own (or sharing a room with female co-workers) with or without their children or living with their parents or relatives, but contributing to the family income. Being able to contribute to the family income lifts the burden from their families/relatives of having to feed another mouth.

Before my father said ‘she is living on us, we have to provide food and clothes ... to marry her off again costs a lot of money’ ... Now he realises that I earn for myself and he will not have to take any burden (Mimosa, jute-plastic worker, 24, abandoned).

C) Male earner in the household but in irregular employment

A third group of women were living with their husbands or parents/relatives, but in a situation where husbands or fathers/brothers were in irregular employment or where the male earner’s income was insufficient for the entire family’s survival. In this case women were not the sole earners, but their extra income was vital for family survival.

Some of the women, who lived with their parents, mentioned specifically having
a feeling of responsibility towards their parents as they were the eldest, or else their brothers had married and needed most of their income for maintaining their own families *i.e.* wife and children. This reflects a situation similar to what Sharma (1985) and Standing (1985) describe as a shift of responsibility from sons to daughters in supporting the parents. According to Sharma (1985:6) 'further research might establish how important this trend is, and whether it is a purely middle class phenomenon.' Sharma’s and Standing’s studies are limited to unmarried daughters of middle class families in India, whereas evidence from my interviews suggest a similar trend for unmarried, married as well as abandoned women from the low-income population.9

I came [to GK] because there were younger siblings to be raised and my father was unable to run the family properly (Shongita, now UNICEF driver, 30, abandoned with child).

Shongita even tries to convince the villagers of the benefits of investing in daughters’ education so that they can get a good job and support their parents.

Villagers are now more hopeful about girls than boys, because they can see the difference. They have seen my example too. I have not given all my money to my inlaws. I’ve spent on my own family, have looked after my younger siblings. So people see that girls are more affiliated to their parents ... At times I tell them [the villagers] if the boys don’t want to study let them be, they can get any kind of job, but a girl can’t take any job, so educate them. It will be beneficial for you in the future (Shongita).

d) Migrants in search for a better future for the entire family

Another group were women migrating with their husbands to urbanising areas such as Savar, because they had either lost their land or did not own enough cultivable land to survive on. Majilla, for example, convinced her husband to sell their few belongings and leave the village in order to start a new life and be able to offer a better future to their children.

I hope to get education so that I can fare better. You know like free myself from the hardships of feeding myself and my family, you see to lead a better life ... If I don’t work I won’t be able to take care of my children and educate them properly ... otherwise I could have stayed in the village (Majilla, ex-carpenter at GK, now at EPZ, 25, married).

Majilla’s husband took on irregular work as a day labourer in textile mills and
brick fields and she worked as a carpenter in GK and later found employment in the Export Processing Zone. Due to the irregular nature of her husband's work Majilla's extra income became crucial for the family's survival.

e) Women with reasons for coming to Gonoshasthaya Kendra other than economic survival

Some women did not have immediate survival motives for coming to Gonoshasthaya Kendra, although they still came from low-income households. Their motivation for coming to GK was usually to become independent and improve their own and their family's well-being. Najma, for example, had heard rumours in her village that women could learn machine sewing at the workshops and would then get a sewing machine. So she came to GK with the fixed idea of taking a sewing machine back home in order to open her own little business at her house sewing clothes for other people.

A few often unmarried or abandoned women came to GK with the intention of delaying or escaping (re)marriage and others, like Simeen, wanted to escape oppressive situations at home. Simeen is of small size, which made it difficult for her family to marry her off. She lived with her brother and his wife and was dependent on them. She was often maltreated by them. She remembers situations, for example, where they deliberately kept the food on top of a cupboard so that she could not reach it. Now she has found a new family and home within GK. Some women might not have been oppressed themselves but remembered their mother's or other women's oppression and/or hardship and hence worked in order to avoid similar situations and have more control over their lives than their mothers.

Whatever my father dictated my mother had to listen to. He beat her often. Of course he did. Men of the older days were living in a different atmosphere, but now the atmosphere has changed. Girls of today can work. They can say that we will work to support ourselves and won't tolerate being beaten ... Why should we tolerate so much scolding and beating? But for them [mothers] it's not like that. They manage all household chores and still tolerate all the beatings ... My father punished my mother, scolded her and swore in our presence ... he beat my mother so much, [that's when I thought] I'd rather go out and work, I won't be beaten like my mother (Mimosa, jute-plastic worker, 24, abandoned).

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Majilla left her village mainly for economic survival reasons (see p. 136), but also emphasised a strong need to escape the oppressive environment of the village.

In my village many girls were beaten up or ill-treated by their husbands. I consoled them or explained things to them. Even now if I go to the village those girls say: 'sister you have done a very good thing by leaving the village' (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

There were also a handful of women who came from fairly well-off families with middle-class backgrounds. These women’s reasons for coming to GK remained vague: their responses to my questions were unclear, leading me to believe that they preferred not to discuss the real reasons. In some cases there was a hint of a secret or disappointing love affair. Two women ran away from home explaining to me that it was because their families would not let them continue their education beyond primary level in their villages.

I came here because of my brother ... he did not let me go to school. I would have stayed home if he gave me the chance to have an education ... My elder brother said 'what's the use of educating a girl? Marry her off' ... I came to GK because they have a night school here (Sara, pump-operator, 16, unmarried).

Besides being drawn to GK to continue her education Sara might have also ran away from home to escape an unwanted marriage.

f) Women who came to GK in preference to other employers

For some women GK was preferable to other employment and they made deliberate choices to come or stay in GK. The thinking behind these choices, however, was very different. Some women, for example, described GK as a secure and respectable work place.

There is complete security here from the point of view of food and lodging. You can feel safe because you don't have to go out and rent a place or hear a bad boy coming and saying bad words ... The other bakeries are dens of all sorts of guys, [but] here there is no bad crowd - there is more safety here (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

Tahera, who lives with her husband in GK, is another example. Her husband comes from a very traditional background. He met his wife at GK, and would not want her to work if they did not need the money as he strongly believes it is a
sin for a husband to let his wife work. He seems, however, to have tolerated his wife's working at GK until now, but says he can only imagine her working outside GK if her workplace guaranteed the same security as GK.

[She can work outside] if it is a good place and if they have the same kind of environment there (Tahera's husband, electrician at GK).

What these women have in common is that GK is their first work experience and they live within the GK premises. This implies that they are not confronted with the type of situation with which women who commute to work every day have to cope. They perceive GK as non-threatening as it offers a safe and friendly working and living environment.

Another group of women prefer GK to their former workplace either because of higher wages or a more fixed type of work or the better working conditions and special facilities at GK such as housing, eating and child care facilities. Mubina, a 25-year-old widow with a child worked in various places before coming to GK. She was in a garment factory and before that she had been a maid servant but had left that job because 'there was no rest'.

Before GK I was working in a garment factory. There is no honour in that job. After coming to GK 'huge' [used English word] change happened. After starting to drive I met many people and all of them respected me ... I like GK more than garments because here I have eating and living facilities. So I can save some money here, and accommodation here is very safe and suitable for me (Mubina, driver, 25, abandoned).

Unlike those women who are too old or who have no chance of employment outside GK, women like Mubina have alternatives. Nevertheless they prefer working at GK to other higher-paid job opportunities outside. The living and child care facilities are also of particular value to Mimosa. She is prepared to trade off higher outside wages with the internal benefits of working at GK.

I'd rather stay here and get 1000 taka than go outside for 2000 taka, because here I don't need to spend money for transport. I can also stay with my babies here. I like the facilities that are available here (Mimosa, jute-plastic worker, 24, abandoned with children).

Mimosa has very clear ideas about her possibilities outside GK: she knows, for example, about the firm where other ex-GK women are working. She keeps herself well-informed and is capable of complaining at high levels about the low
salaries at GK. She is by no means shy about demanding her rights and in meetings she speaks very confidently about the drawbacks of GK. Despite her critical attitude towards certain aspects of GK, however, she still on the whole appreciates it as a workplace and believes that women are respected there. Another woman explained her bond to GK as follows:

I can quit GK anytime because my contract term with GK is over. But since I like GK I am still working for them. If I went abroad I could get a lot more salary ... No other company has given so much priority to women’s employment. And we have worked hard over here. So due to a kind of inner attachment we are still hanging on in GK ... As long as GK likes my services I will stay (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart, because husband took a second wife).

5.5 Gonoshasthaya Kendra: the ‘alternative’ employer

In Chapter Four I have established that GK is an indigenous organisation following the integrated development approach. Amongst its various services and programmes one is to provide women with training in ‘non-traditional’ trades. Women who come to GK initially tend to see it as a place where they have the opportunity to earn an income. In their need to secure their own and their families survival the development agency becomes an employer in their eyes. GK, however, is foremost a development organisation and therefore differs from normal work places. It differs, however, not only in the fringe benefits it offers its workers, such as medical services and schooling, but particularly in the way it aims at contesting women’s traditional roles - roles that are ‘suitable’ and socially acceptable for women in Bangladesh. It does this by deliberately placing women in ‘non-traditional’ work, challenging existing notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ in Bangladesh.

‘Non-traditional’ work, however, has to be seen in the context of Bangladesh, where it can mean virtually anything requiring women to leave the house and enter the public domain. Even garment factory work, for example, has been referred to as ‘non-traditional’ work. The non-traditional elements of garment factory work are leaving home, earning a cash income and learning new skills. One can argue, however, that the nature of the work, sewing textiles, is
traditionally seen as 'feminine'. Certain types of work women perform at GK such as welding and carpentry, on the other hand, are not only non-traditional, but also involve activities traditionally regarded as 'masculine'.

GK's strategy goes beyond merely having women perform unconventional work. One of its aims is, for example, to break down stereotyped notions about women's mobility and visibility. GK's expectations of its female 'workers' are therefore far more radical than those of the garment factories. Garment factories require no extra mobility on the part of their women workers beyond their daily commuting between home and work. Some of the factories even provide buses for the workers that pick women up and drop them at their homes and therefore almost guarantee a 'purdah' safe' work environment where women do not even have to handle daily encounters on the road. In contrast, women commuting from their homes to GK usually have to walk unaccompanied for 1/2 to 1 hour and some have to take public transport, which is often a novelty.

I didn't know roads and paths much, didn't go out of the house - now I recognise everything, now no place is unknown anymore. I've known everything through work (Bina, construction worker, 30, married).

GK goes even further than that as women have to commit themselves to being mobile in their employment contract. When the necessity arises they have to be prepared to go to flood-affected areas to work there for an indefinite period. Some women even had to move to a GK subcentre. Except for the few female drivers needed in the main centre at Savar, all other drivers are trained at GK's subcentre in Cox's Bazaar, which is located in the far south of Bangladesh (see Plate 4.1). They usually end up living there whilst employed with GK, as most drivers are needed to transport workers and equipment to the flooded areas during emergencies.

Overall quite a lot of GK women have been to places like Cox's Bazaar. There women are engaged in flood rehabilitation work such as pond desalination, reconstruction and repair works. The GK relief team usually comprises female and male pump operators, mechanics, carpenters and builders. Travelling to unknown, distant, places without the company of a male guardian is very unusual for women in Bangladesh and undoubtedly an intimidating experience.
for most women.

I was afraid to go there because it was so far away. We even heard that many people die there from diarrhoea. I was so afraid of the waves while we were crossing the sea ... I didn't have proper food there and couldn't sleep properly and was crying all the time ... I had to go there [because of her GK contract] and I had to leave my baby here [in Savar] (Rahima, carpentry, 35, separated).

When the GK women arrived in the coastal areas the villagers' initial reaction was usually very suspicious and unfriendly towards them so they had to get used to confront difficult situations.

They said very bad things at first ... when they stopped bad talking they invited us to their houses and gave us food (Rahima).

Other women are sent abroad for training purposes. Nasmun was one of four women who were sent to the Philippines for two months. Two women went from the shoe-making department and two from the bakery. The women travelled to the Philippines without any male company. Nasmun was newly-married but was more or less forced to leave her husband behind. This is an example of GK intervention into family life. In Bangladesh it is normally unthinkable to have a newly-married woman going off on her own on a journey. Newly-married women in particular are very much subject to community control and are expected to demonstrate their propriety and modesty to their in-laws. Nasmun went to the Philippines three months after her marriage. When asked how she felt about the trip she responded:

New country, new people, time went by just watching all these things. We saw and learned, but we don't have those machines here. But I watched. I got my ideas. I can do the work, I can make shoes.

*Question: Did you wish to stay there?*

I was newly-married that time. I left my husband at home. I didn't feel like it. I had some trouble with their food, but at the end I thought I'd like to stay [laughing].

*Question: If GK told you to go to Sri Lanka would you go?*

Yes. I am much braver now. I can go (Nasmun, shoe-making, 22, newly-married).
Kaleda, from the bakery department, also went to the Philippines. She was married for a year before going to the Philippines, but lived apart from her husband, because he was working in a GK subcentre. Her travel experience was similar to Nasmun's.

I was very afraid. At the beginning I was worried about the food they would give us, what we would be doing there, how good the people were there, but everything worked out well in the end.

*Question: How did you feel when you got off the plane?*

When we arrived we saw that nobody had come to receive us. The immigration office didn't let us go. Then after being informed by our [GK] office in the Philippines they let us go. When we came out we saw people had come to pick us up ... They held up a GK sign. We felt reassured by that GK sign. Then our fear disappeared.

*Question: You were in the Philippines for two months without any men [male protection]. How did you feel?*

At the beginning it felt bad. Later it turned out all right.

*Question: Did you think you needed the company of a male Bengali?*

Yes. They had told us in GK 'there will be Bengali students with you', but we didn't see anybody.

*Question: Do you think you could now go abroad without the help of any male?*

Yes I will be able to.

*Question: Why do you think so?*

Since I have been abroad once I am not afraid anymore (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

The examples above demonstrate GK's interference into women's private lives: For married women, and especially newly-married women, travelling alone is an action that goes totally against cultural norms. GK's radical intervention, however, seems to have had an empowering effect on the women. In this case, both women realised that male protection was not always necessary, contrary to what they had been brought up to believe.

As illustrated above, GK's demands on women who want to join the organisation
are quite extreme and require an enormous amount of strength from the women's side as they are encouraged to break with their cultural upbringing in many ways. Women are undoubtedly going through a process of change in GK. The mere fact of leaving home and stepping out into an unknown environment is already a huge step for the average Bangladeshi village woman. This process of change and adaptation is not an easy one. It needs time and is often rather painful.

5.6 Contradictory process of change

Coming to GK was a new experience for most women and they remember their initial fears and doubts. Many women were afraid of the new place and the fact that they had to interact with so many unknown people. They had left the familiarity and security of their private homes behind to find themselves in a new environment full of strangers. GK is not a public space as such, but neither is it private to the newcomers. Furthermore in order to physically get to GK the women have to transgress clearly defined public spaces. Inevitably they also have to face encounters with others in these public spaces, such as in the streets, on the buses. Once in GK the women were intimidated by the work itself since GK was the first formal work place for most of them: they did not know what they were expected to do, they were afraid of the supervisors and they were afraid of doing something wrong. Most women needed a certain amount of time to get used to the new environment in order to feel confident enough to deal with the new situation. The time women said they had needed to get used to the new work experience varied from three months to three years.

The older-generation women remember the early days of GK and their own fears of being the subject of gossip and people’s reaction to their work.

I wasn’t that clear how far we [women] can go [progress]. The people were saying bad things, I also didn’t think it was that good. I cried a lot. But now I am strong, now I say to other women ‘you should work and be self-reliant’ (Shongita, now UNICEF driver, 30, abandoned).

I am not suggesting that all women necessarily reacted with fear. Some women
did not mention it at all. The reason for this was usually an earlier exposure to GK from their childhood or previous formal work experience. Some said they did not have any feelings of fear when they started at GK because their situation was so desperate that they had no alternative but to work.

One has to remember that I was asking these women to recall feelings with the benefit of hindsight and some might have forgotten what exactly they had felt in their early days at GK. But not remembering or not mentioning fear is in itself suggestive of its not having been a major issue for these women. A few women - especially those who had not come to GK for basic survival reasons - remembered a feeling of curiosity about their new work rather than fear.

The following quote illustrates Shongita's first impressions of the new work place, how painful the process of change was for her and how she finally adapted to the new situation. She was about 15 years old when she came to GK in 1980 after her husband had abandoned her and her child because of unmet dowry demands.

After looking around [GK] I became very upset that over here men and women work together, sit together, eat together ... I cried a lot in the beginning. I wanted to go back home ... I wept so much that my companions could not sleep at night ... When I remembered home I'd pack up all my luggage and be ready to quit the place in the morning. Things went on like that. Then gradually I learned the work so well ... I did all the work - looking after cash, management, kitchen - everything was in my control - I managed it - I had become so capable ... GK is good for us - for the women ... Really a great thing. See, we didn't have any kind of qualifications, but we still have the opportunity to learn a particular skill, to get a job, to mix with different people. When I came here first I could not even look at somebody while talking. I felt shy to talk to any man. And now, not only can I talk with men, if I am asked to go from one end of Bangladesh to the other end, it would not be a problem at all (Shongita, 30, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).

This quotation demonstrates on the one hand the disturbing and traumatic procedure of change, but at the same time it also illustrates rather well how a woman can grow into a different person over time and develop a feeling of being in control. It shows how women who might initially have had no specific expectations from work other than its providing them with the means for
survival can change their attitude to work and their environment. After having gone through a period of adaptation their new experience can contribute to generating a sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Given the opportunity, women like Shongita can discover their own capabilities. This reflects GK's objectives of building up women's confidence by making them aware of their dormant potentials. I am not trying to say that all women are as confident as Shongita and that each woman is affected by the experience of leaving home and working at GK in similar ways. Each woman changes at her own pace and one can find women in various stages of change within GK. There was also a handful of women who could not see any particular change in their lives and who maybe never will. Some women therefore might not change their perception of themselves. Others might simply feel more comfortable at home. When asked if other women wanted to be as independent as her one woman responded:

Not all of them, but those girls who are facing problems want to get a job and be independent. Not everybody can work hard like we do; so many of them quit (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

Perceptions of change depend very much on the women's individual circumstances as well as their personalities. Bina, for example, has a rather fatalistic and pessimistic attitude towards life compared to most other women at GK. She sees no positive change in her life since coming to GK. She has been working in GK for the last five years in the construction department after her husband had an accident and became an invalid. They have four children, two daughters (whom she had to marry off sooner than she actually wanted to) and two younger sons. The entire family depends on Bina's rather meagre income. She is not too happy about the low salary and complains about not having got a salary rise yet. To her GK represents nothing but a job. Her situation is that of pure daily survival and her fatalism is unlikely to change as long as she remains trapped in the logic of everyday survival.

*Question: What do you like or dislike about your work?*

For me it's OK. It is good for everyone to do his or her allocated work ...

*Question: What were the changes in your life after you joined GK?*

My situation is not good after I came to GK.
**Question: Why?**

Now you see I am in trouble by all means. Now I have to do everything by myself in order to survive (Bina, construction, 30 married).\(^\text{10}\)

Having said this the interviews suggest, however, that most women's conceptions of work and perceptions of their own potentials have changed.

### 5.7 The impact of paid work on gender roles

Whether women's participation in paid employment is an empowering or disempowering experience - whether it contests, maintains or reinforces gendered roles - depends on various factors: for example, women's motivations to earn an income or the type of work they perform. Home-based piece-work has been criticised for maintaining women's isolation and limiting their control over income.\(^\text{11}\) Factory work is often associated with exploitative work relationships and argued to be 'unlikely to add to women's sense of self-worth and agency' (Young 1993:156). It has been criticised for its bad working conditions, job insecurity, lack of training and promotion opportunities, health and safety hazards, lack of social security benefits and low wages (Edgren 1982, Pearson 1998). Some feminists, though, have emphasised potentially empowering elements of factory work such as allowing women to leave home, to delay marriage, increase their mobility and exercise independence (Joekes 1987, Lim 1983, Kabeer 1995b). Lim, for example, argues that women often prefer factory work to the alternatives of staying home, early marriage, farm work or domestic labour. According to Young (1993) cooperative or collective production work - provided women are not engaged in low-productivity labour - is more likely to have empowering potentials compared to the other two types of employment.

How does the work women perform at GK fit into this discussion? Does it have empowering elements or is it exploitative? How does it affect gender roles and relationships at the work place, at home and in the communities? Does it contribute to any changes in women's lives? How do the women themselves describe their work experience at GK? Do they perceive it as empowering or
disempowering? What does the work at GK mean to them and do these meanings change over time? In section 5.4 I have mentioned how some women prefer GK to other employers, because they feel safe and secure there. Women do not feel isolated in GK as they work together in groups. Some appreciated the friendly work environment at GK. Others describe it as a respectable work place where they can trust the people they work with. They see it as a non-threatening place, where no 'bad people' can harm them. Many praise particularly GK's special facilities as it provides women with shelter, food, child care, health and educational facilities and social security benefits. Women are provided with literacy and awareness-raising classes and are encouraged to go for further education. Some are sent abroad for training purposes as illustrated in section 5.5. What that section demonstrated as well, however, was that GK also demands a lot from its workers. Such high expectations are not easy to adjust to as shown in the last section. Women’s initial fears and doubts, though, seem to have transformed into strength, confidence and self-esteem: feelings which affect the way women relate to themselves and others. Over time women’s perceptions of the work they perform at GK have changed. It is no longer just a means for survival for most women, but has become an expression of a new identity. How women have negotiated these new work identities within their households is discussed next.

5.7.1 Negotiating new work identities within the household

One major difference between women’s new employment opportunities in NGOs or factories and the limited work options they had before (home-based piece-work or domestic service) is that women are now making a visible and significant contribution to the family income, especially in a context where men’s ability to meet their traditional roles as breadwinners is declining. In most cases women’s relatively stable wages are absolutely vital for the household’s survival and for ‘smooth[ing] out fluctuations created by men’s [irregular] earning activities’ (Kabeer 1995b:13).

Figure 5.1 shows women’s contribution to the family income per month. The figure excludes those cases where women are either 'proshikon' (women receiving
Tk 100 in a pre-training period) or the sole earners in the household (70 women). Both axes in Figure 5.1 are on a logarithmic scale. The figure shows that as the family income decreases, women's contribution to the family income increases. Figure 5.2 compares each woman's income to the average income for her household. The figure indicates that in all households earning less than Tk 4000 per month approximately one third of the women earn more than the average income for that household. However, no woman earns more than the average in households above Tk 4000 per month. Figure 5.3 compares women's income to that of the head of the household. The numbers 1 - 6 explain who is head of the household as defined by the woman. (1 = herself, 2 = her husband, 3 = her father, 4 = her brother, 5 = her mother, 6 = her in-laws). In Figure 5.3 all values to the right of the thick line are those households, where women earn less than the head of the household and those to the left are households where women earn more than the head of the household.

The average income of all women in my sample (127) is Tk 832 per month and that of the other earners (excluding the women) is Tk 1478 per month. (There are two cases where the others' earnings are very high, which will bias this number. Without those two cases the average income of other earners is Tk 1235 per month.) The maximum income of the women is Tk 2200 per month and the minimum Tk 100 per month (i.e. the money the proshikon women receive). The maximum income of the other earners is Tk 17,000 per month and the minimum 0. The average total family income (including the women) is Tk 2299 per month. However, if I consider all women in my sample - including the proshikon women (10 women) and sole earners (47 women) - it would mean that the average woman accounts for 60 per cent of her family income. This figure is biased by the proshikon women and sole earners. After excluding these the average woman, earning Tk 850 per month, then accounts for 38 per cent of her family income, now Tk 3162 per month.
Figure 5.1 Women's contribution as percentage of total family income (in Tk, excluding proshikon and sole-earners)

Figure 5.2 Women's income relative to the average income in each household (in Tk, excluding proshikon and sole-earners)
Figure 5.3 Women's income compared to head of household income (in Tk, excluding proshikon and sole-earners)
See text for explanation
Changes in power relations within the household, however, are very subtle. Access to income alone does not automatically have to lead to increased decision-making in the household. In most cases wages are used directly to meet the immediate survival needs of the household. Questions on the impact of women's wages in relation to increased decision-making and control over resources almost seem irrelevant as there are not that many resources within the household in the first place. At GK the women earn Tk 700 per month as trainees and a minimum of Tk 1200 as employees. Work opportunities for men are often limited to specific times in the year and therefore paid on a daily basis. Men's earnings fall into three major groups. The poorest group earns only Tk 500-1000 per month as agricultural day labourers, construction workers and bus conductors. The second group earn Tk 1000-2000 as industrial workers (in textile mills, rice mills, ceramic factories, biscuit factories and the export processing zone), bus drivers, mechanics, tailors and rickshaw pullers. A few of the husbands, fathers or other male relatives earn between Tk 2000 and 4000. They either cultivate their own land, run a grocery shop, engage in (often seasonal) petty trade (in rice, jute or timber, for example) or possess their own rickshaw. A handful have gone to the Middle East. Other female family members were often in employment as well. Sisters were most likely to work in garment factories and the export processing zone, whereas mothers worked in their own homes making quilts, husking rice or raising poultry.

When asked how the family income was spent, women usually said that food took up half the income. In case of a married couple with children food expenditure per month would come to approximately Tk 1200 to 1500. Rent would be between Tk 300 and Tk 500 per month. About Tk 100 to 200 were mentioned as money spent on children's clothes and education and other expenses would include medical services and GK-specific expenses such as contributions to pension schemes or life insurance. Most women kept about Tk 100 per month for personal expenses such as soap, cream, coconut oil and transport. They bought two to four new sari's per year and occasionally a piece of jewellery, an asset for future emergencies. Sometimes a small part of the income could be sent to their parents or in-laws. Some women saved Tk 100-200 in the bank, which would usually be earmarked for the children's future or their own, in case their marriages broke up. Those who managed to save a reasonable amount of money would mainly
invest it in land. On the whole, however, money earned was quickly spent on daily necessities and efforts to explore who 'controlled' the income became pointless. Table 5.9 illustrates who kept the income.

Table 5.9 Who keeps the income?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who keeps the income</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>The woman herself</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's husband</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both husband and wife</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's father</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's brother</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The woman's mother</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study

As above table (5.9) demonstrates 57 per cent women at GK stated that they kept their own income. However, this does not automatically imply that they were all also responsible for income management i.e. for allocative decisions within the household.

In order to understand fully all the possible influences and nuances of household decision-making, one would need a much deeper insight into the various dimensions of a Bangladeshi family than I was able to achieve. For example, women might have much more influence on decisions than they were prepared to tell me, or they themselves might not consider the ability to make decisions important to their lives. I do know that in a few cases women were actually responsible for most household decisions, but would nevertheless describe their husbands as the decision-makers: 'he knows better than me'. In these cases the women were often better educated than their husbands and would make the decisions on income expenditure and the children's education, but the husbands would be the ones who were responsible for spending the money.
I fix it [manage the money] and he spends the money (Tahera, electrician, 20, married).

In other cases women told me their husbands handed over all the income to them, which could mean that the husband trusted his wife a great deal, but at the end of the day it was still he who was responsible for spending income. In extended family households decisions are quite often influenced by other family members such as in-laws or brothers. In a few cases women described themselves as the main decision-makers. Others were temporary heads of the household while their husbands were sick or absent. In one particular, but still very rare, case the woman managed to renegotiate the household arrangements completely. She had left her violent husband and took on a job at GK. He came back to her once she was economically solvent. She agreed to take him back, but on her own conditions. She has now taken over the breadwinner role, whereas her husband takes care of the household.

He would like me to give him all the money, so that he could spend it as he wishes, but I don’t let him.

Question: Does anybody scold him, because he lives on his wife’s money?

My parents and relatives do.

Question: What does he respond?

He says ‘I do all the cooking and household work. I do her work and she works outside’ ...

Question: For how long has your husband done the housework?

Only since I am here [at Deposhai, where she is the manager of the handicrafts cooperative] ...

Question: Who takes the major decisions?

I do.

Question: Does your husband get angry about that?

Yes, he does. He says ‘why do you do everything without my permission? Am I not a man? Am I not your husband?’

Question: And what do you respond to that?

I usually ignore him. I say to him ‘you never solve a problem anyway, so how can you make decisions?’
I agree with Sharma (1990) and White (1992) that the decision-making process is an enormously complex issue. Age, life-cycle and household size and structure all have an important influence on women's position in the family.\textsuperscript{13} I find it difficult, therefore, to draw any clear conclusions on quantifiable changes in household decision-making relations.

For the majority of women the income they earn at GK is vital for survival. Income, therefore at first sight, appears to be a practical need. In GK's approach to empowerment, however, income also embodies strategic elements. What makes income become strategic is the fact that women own it. Credit schemes have been criticised as not really empowering women so long as women beneficiaries continue to hand over the income to their husbands (Ebdon 1995, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1994, Montgomery et al. 1994). GK has not entirely solved this problem as some women still choose to hand over their income. What GK has provided for, however, is the possibility of depositing the money in the GK bank. The idea apparently came from the women themselves. Quasem Chowdhury, one of the GK directors, remembers the women's complaint to him in the early days:

On the second day of the month my husband knows I will get paid, so he stays at home and when I go back he takes the money. He says it is not for booze or anything, he needs the money for buying seeds or irrigation. I know he needs it for that, but when I need money, I don't have it.

The women's suggestion was to secretly store part of the income at GK. GK's idea was to open a bank account for the women. The bank account is in the woman's name and even if she finally decides to give the money to her husband, he still has to ask her for it, which gives the woman a certain degree of power over the 'official' head of the household.

The interviews do suggest, however, that nowadays most women at GK feel they have acquired some form of economic independence. They believe their income-earning capacity has led to an improvement in their own and their families' material well-being. The women described economic independence as 'standing on one's own feet'. They felt as if they could now take care of themselves and 'have' whatever they wanted without asking someone else, in other words without depending on someone else. Having their own income enabled them to go to some places on their own, such as health centres, banks, cinemas, fairs. The
income enabled them to buy medicine or go shopping for themselves. They no longer had to wait until their male guardians decided to buy things for them.

When I was at home I had to depend on my parents or my husband. I could only have something if someone gave it to me ... Now, although I have a husband I don’t go about depending on him. If today I feel like buying a sari, I can buy it without hesitation (Selina, boiler-operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Economic independence allowed women to have aspirations for a better future. It enabled them to lead a better life than before. Some women also referred to the hardships their mothers had to face, and this made them wish to be able to have more control over their lives than their mothers had.

My mother spent her life in misery. Is that what I should want? We were too many children, there was only one breadwinner ... I want a different life [from my mother’s] in all aspects. The hardship my mother and others like her suffered from, should I want that in my life? (Nasmun, shoe-making, 22, married, but husband left her after her pregnancy during the fieldwork period).

My father never buys clothes for my mother, other people give her clothes. He only buys clothes for himself ... I don’t have to ask anyone for any kind of support. Whenever I need something I can manage myself (Nasreen, jute-plastic worker, 22, abandoned).

Besides gaining economic independence many GK women also changed their perceptions of marital life and now envisage more egalitarian forms of matrimony.

Both husband and wife should take decisions together (Kudera, ex-GK worker, 48, married).

Their images of a husband do not match that suggested by a common Bengali proverb: ‘A woman’s heaven lies under the feet of her husband’. The ideal husband should rather: ‘listen to my wishes’, ‘be a literate person, who understands when I am ill or in a sad mood’, ‘help in the housework when there is too much pressure’. Women no longer ask their husband’s permission for everything they do, unlike some of the village women I met.

It depends on his wish, not mine ... even if I go to another house, I ask his permission (Majeda, village woman, 19, recently married).

GK women now find themselves in better intra-household bargaining positions
than before. In some cases the housework is shared. A lot of women mentioned that their husbands listened to them more than before, and decisions were often discussed more after the wife had started working. They felt more respected by their husbands and argued that as extra income was good for the family, there was no reason why their husbands should not be happy.

Previously he would take most decisions by himself. Now he discusses certain matters with me and also asks for suggestions. He gives me more importance now (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

When only my husband was working and he would come home after work I was always supposed to be worried about him, to think of what he might need, to look after him, because he is the one who is earning money, so he expects to be taken care of. But now both of us are working, so this situation is not necessary anymore and he is more cooperative with me (Rinu, ex-GK worker, now working in a jute-fabric, 24, married).

Instead of following standard decision-making models, which tend to measure women's status by the type and amount of decisions they make in the household after engaging in paid work, I therefore focused on women's redefinitions of their roles and positions within the household. Kabeer suggests that the approach should be widened 'from decisions concerning intra-household allocational issues to the broader aspects of women's lives ... [for example] their capacity to form, survive and prosper in alternative arrangements, including living on their own' (Kabeer 1995b:28).

Work is now considered by many women as a viable alternative to oppressive marriages. Married women can walk out of oppressive marriages or are prepared for the future in case marriages break up. Abandoned women have a means of survival and are no longer a liability to others. They can also escape remarriage and unmarried women can delay marriage. If one recalls GK's objective of changing women's status as a liability to their families the outcome of my interviews can clearly confirm that GK has succeeded in this objective for most of the interviewed women. Women state that they do not need to ask others for help anymore, depend on the mercy of relatives or burden anybody in times of crisis. Now they no longer feel like a liability to others. One of my respondents stated that she would not have left her husband if she had not been sure of the job at GK, since she knew her parents would not have been able to take on an
extra financial burden. In general women in Bangladesh tend to avoid living alone, but having a job can now enable them to walk out on their husbands if they really want to, which would not have been possible before. They are more prepared for the future and consider their earning skills a valuable asset should they be abandoned.\textsuperscript{15}

In our society many women had to live with their husbands no matter how badly they were treated by them. They had no other option. But now men see that women can earn their own living. So they [the men] think that if the women become independent they will not have their superiority over them anymore. I think what a man can do a woman can do as well ... After coming here [I think like that]. Before I did not have this kind of mentality (Selina, boiler-operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Before women always had to depend on the husband, but now if the husband quarrels with his wife she can go to work (Nasmun, shoe-maker, 22, married).

Rahima was afraid of her husband who used to beat her regularly. He left her for another woman and since then she has been working at GK. Now the husband has asked her to come back to him, but she no longer wants to do so:

I am fine without a husband. He would never give me permission to go outside ... Everything had to be done according to his words. Now I am free. There is nobody to tell me anything (Rahima, carpentry, 35, abandoned).

\textbf{5.7.2 Increased sense of self}

Women’s new roles were also expressed in increased self-confidence and sense of self. Their meanings of waged work have therefore stretched beyond purely material gains by also including intangible benefits. They pointed out that they were now capable of doing things they would never have dreamed of doing before. For example, they were capable of teaching others and passing on knowledge to others. They were able to support others even though they were ‘their father’s daughters’, and to help others in need. Some of them felt a greater sense of self-worth as a result of having learned a specific skill and having responsibility in their job. Most women realised that they could do the same work as men did. This realisation was important to them as it encouraged women to question
Doing ‘men’s’ work

Although the strategy of gender role-reversal has been criticised for making men’s behaviour the standard it has had a strong effect on the women performing ‘men’s’ work at GK. Realising that they were able to do men’s work has made them aware of their own potentials. They have acquired skills for which usually only men have been appreciated before. In the context of Bangladesh women from a very early age are made believe that they are not able to do many things to such an extent that many women end up harbouring internalized feelings of inferiority. They are unable to handle machines, they are unable to deal with cash, their presence in markets would bring bad luck to others, they are not able to move around without the protection of a male guardian, they do not have an identity other than that of the family. Women’s idealized position is firmly placed within the private family. Activities that require women to leave the confines of the home are considered unsuitable for them. Therefore ‘doing men’s work’ undoubtedly shakes up the foundations of their traditional upbringing. In GK women are doing things they would never have imagined they were able to do. Doing men’s work is therefore not about setting men’s behaviour as a standard, but about undermining stereotyped notions of women’s and men’s (in)abilities. It is about women unlearning wrong assumptions of what they are able and not able to do and learning to believe in themselves and their potentials.

Doing ‘men’s work’ also breaks the myths of what people think women are capable of doing. In this sense GK’s objective of building up women’s self-confidence and making them and society believe in their potential has succeeded as the women now understand that they can do almost anything contrary to the general beliefs they have been brought up with.
All the men working over here, none of them is more capable than I am. Anything a man can do, I can do as well (Selina, boiler-operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Slowly slowly I learned how to do my work. Nobody is born an expert out of their mother’s belly, but you can do anything if you try (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

You can do everything after you learn it. Gonoshasthaya has been giving girls do all sorts of work (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

GK proved that if an illiterate woman gets training she can do everything (Jamina, ex jute-plastic worker at GK, now working at a jute-plastic firm in Dhaka, 30, abandoned).

When asked if they had ever wished to have been born a man instead of a woman several women responded that they might have thought so before joining GK. Now, however, they had realised that as women they could do the same men did, so there was no need to be born as a man. Some women, for example, found pride in their work and the fact that they were taking over the role of a family breadwinner.

Now that I have work I can give money to my parents and look after their needs. So you see that makes me feel pleased at heart. I was once dependent on them and now in spite of being a woman I can help my parents (Selina, boiler-operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Now I think there is no difference [between men and women], but I used to think so before ... even as my father’s daughter I am working and can help [the family] ... before I couldn’t help at all (Najma, laundry, 20, married).

What is the difference between men and women [now]? Men are doing jobs, so are we ... before sons were regarded as men, daughters did not have any importance ... my grandmother used to say that men deserve more respect and women were just the beings behind the veil (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

When I was in trouble I thought I’d rather be a man. I could solve my problems more easily. But now I am working like a man although I am a woman. I don’t feel sorry about being a woman anymore (Hassina, manager of the handicrafts cooperative in Deposhai, 40, married).
It would have been much easier [if I had been born a man], but now I don't feel like this anymore ... Now I think if you are able to do a job it doesn't matter anymore whether you are a man or a woman.

*Question: Do you think there is a difference between a man and a woman?*

Now I don't think there is a difference.

*Question: Why do you think that?*

I didn't know that women were able to do all these types of work and could live peacefully, but now I know (Shongita, now UNICEF driver, 30, abandoned with child).

Not all women necessarily think this way. Some women have difficulties in reconciling their 'masculine' work surroundings with the cultural interpretations of 'feminine' identity. Rinu, for example, used to work at GK and is now employed at a jute-plastic firm in Dhaka, where she lives on her own. Her husband and her children, however, live in Savar. Her husband comes to visit her every weekend and she manages to get home every two to three months. She is a woman, who lives separate from her family, earns her own income by performing a 'masculine' job, takes care of her own expenses and saves some money at the GK bank in case her husband dies one day. Rinu's actions are untypical for a woman in Bangladesh and appear to resemble those of an 'empowered' woman. The same woman, however, is still convinced that there should be different types of jobs for men and women:

Men should do heavy work and women light work, be men's helping hand only (Rinu, ex-GK worker, 24, married).

Bina, who only works in the construction department because her husband became disabled, argues in similar terms about different responsibilities, except that in her view women just happen to end up with twice as much work as men when they enter wage employment.
A woman after coming back from work has to do the cooking, look after the children, do the beds, I mean they have to do everything.

Question: And the men?

Men, after coming home from work - what is there for them to do?

Question: Why? Don't you think men should do housework as well?

You see, the wife is there. [jolly tone] ... There is a difference between men and women. Men don't bother with housework ... Women now work outside as well as inside. After coming from outside work they have to do the household work too.

Question: Don't you think this is unfair?

I don't think it is bad, because that's the way things are (Bina, construction worker, 30, married).

Doing relief work

As mentioned earlier, some GK women were sent to work in other regions in Bangladesh as part of a relief team. By doing relief work women developed a sense of self-worth in various ways. First they discovered a value in their ability to help other people in need. The team is usually in great demand from the affected community as well as the government. Once the villagers get used to the sight of women doing repair work they start to appreciate GK women for what they are doing.

I did woodwork like doors and windows for schools ... then we put a roof to the house, built one or two benches ... Besides that we repaired some houses ... We liked it a lot because we could all work together unitedly ... They [people in the village] cried a lot when we went back [to Savar] (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

Women furthermore feel that GK hands over a lot of responsibility to the relief team. For example the team is entirely responsible for handling equipment such as pumps to desalinate ponds (GK Report 1991). The participation of women in the relief operations is also a deliberate strategy on the part of GK in order to ensure that 'food and medical assistance reaches the women of the affected areas as well as to provide persons on the teams that women can approach and communicate with' (GK 1991:21). With this approach GK tries to contest images
of ‘female victims’ and ‘male saviours’.

The following quotation illustrates how the relief experiences affected GK ‘saviour’ women when confronted with ‘victim’ women and how they developed feelings of compassion and solidarity with other ‘mothers’ in particular.

I felt very happy [to do the relief work] because those people were like us once, but now they are ruined. We showed our sympathy to many mothers. Their houses were smashed and many of them lost their children because of the high tidal waves (Rahima, carpenter, 35, separated).

GK women felt solidarity with the people in need because they remembered and reflected their own past hardships. Rahima for instance identified strongly with the mothers because she remembered her own history when she was kicked out from her husband’s house after he had taken a second wife and how she had to fight for many years to get her baby back. She can therefore relate very strongly to the mothers’ agony at losing their children. Rahima has clearly changed her attitude towards work. Her initial resentment and discomfort at travelling so far to do relief work (see p. 142) changed into a feeling of pride and satisfaction when she realised she was capable of giving physical and emotional support to other people.

*Teaching others and having responsibility at work*

Other women felt an increased sense of self-esteem because of their particular skills in passing on their knowledge to others and taking over the new role of a teacher and/or their feelings of duty and responsibility for their work. Some of the senior female workers with long work experience at GK (approximately 10 years) are given the responsibility of teaching the incoming workers and of acting as supervisors. This gives them a feeling of pride because they remember when they themselves were in the position of being ‘learners’. One of the welders mentioned they had about nine to ten newcomers in that year and about six to seven senior workers functioning as supervisors in the welding section. Similar accounts were given in the carpentry, printing press and driving sections. The following quotation demonstrates how proud one of the female drivers was of her teaching position. A widowed woman with dependent children would usually not
have many chances of earning the kind of respect she is given as a driving instructor.

*Question: How do you feel about teaching other women?*

I am feeling good, because I know something and I am teaching that to other people.

*Question: Are you proud of that?*

Of course I am proud, everybody respects me here as 'USTAD' [respectful way of addressing a teacher; in this context it means 'sir'].

*Question: Is teaching hard?*

Yes of course. I always have to tell them the same thing so many times, so it is a bit hard. I have to show them the same thing again and again. Just imagine a girl had an accident, then GK would have to pay for that (Mubina, driver, 25, abandoned).

This quotation illustrates how Mubina feels respected in her position as a teacher and how her sense of responsibility adds to her value as a driving instructor as she has to make sure that 'the girls don't make any accidents' (for which GK would be accountable).

Jamina replaced a male trainer at the jute-plastic workshop and remembers his reluctance to teach women ten years ago. She says he always let the women do the 'stupid paper jobs'. Unfortunately there are not that many women in supervisory roles yet. There are a few senior women who would have the necessary experience to replace the male department supervisors and act as female role models, but they hesitate to take on more responsibility. Razia, for example, is happy about instructing new comers, but when asked if she could take over the 'boss's' role her internalised images of 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles emerge. She believes she could handle most things, but as a 'boss' one has to deal with money, taking cash to Dhaka or buying/ordering materials, for example, and as a woman she thinks it would be dangerous to move about with money. According to Razia women carrying out such roles would lack security. She associates dealing with money in the public sphere with men, not women, failing to recognise that her security argument can apply to men just as much as it does to women.
In contrast, Hassina, GK's only female manager of a handicraft cooperative, is responsible for all sorts of tasks: buying material from the market, supervising the whole work process, selling the goods to the customers and negotiating with the villagers, as well as handling the accounting and book-keeping. Now she is even dreaming of running her own cooperative without any GK backing. Hassina used to be regularly beaten by her husband and left him when it was suggested she should start a cooperative in her village.

At first the villagers gossiped a lot about me and put pressure on him [husband] and he beat me. He said: 'if you go to Gonoshasthaya Kendra you will wear no veil, there you wear shirt and pants and then you turn into a bad woman ... Now they [the villagers] respect me ... I am a teacher, so many women in the village have learned from me, so they respect me (Hassina, manager of a handicraft cooperative, 40, married).
Plates 5.1 and 5.2 Hassina during work in the handicrafts cooperative
Other women, like Selina, identified with their own jobs and felt valued for the responsibility they now held. Selina is the first female boiler operator in Bangladesh and it seems that she enjoys her job a lot. She has a detailed technical knowledge of her work and a logical understanding of how machines run. She takes her work very seriously.

I must sit and watch. If something goes wrong and the boiler bursts people could get killed. So I have to sit there and keep an eye on everything. Electricity runs the whole thing, but one has to sit there and watch. Suppose some unfortunate incident happens: suppose there is no water in the boiler, any moment an accident may occur. Then there are two safety valves in our boiler. Suppose a safety valve is not working, but the boiler is running. From where would the pressure be released? In that case any part of the boiler which is weak would burst and that is how the pressure would get released. Therefore a boiler operator is required to stay near to the boiler to keep an eye on it (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Listening to her talking about her work leaves the impression of a woman being very satisfied and fulfilled with her work.

I like all sorts of work. I like working on the boiler machine. I also like the new plant which has just been installed. We do the whole job.

**Question: Can you do all kinds of work?**

I have to do all the mechanical work myself.

**Question: How many boiler machines are there in total?**

We have two boilers in pharmaceuticals and one over here.

**Question: Do you also go to pharmaceuticals?**

Well! I go to pharmaceuticals too. Now there is another girl who has a licence for the pharmaceuticals boiler. So I don't have to go now. Before I was the only one with a licence so I had to look after that place as well. When something went wrong they would call me.

**Question: Apart from staying at the machine is there anything else you have to do?**

Yes. I do all kinds of work. Suppose if a motor burns or gets a short circuit or a machine goes out of order, I do all such repair and service work with my own hands (Selina).
In trying to understand why women like Selina react to work in such a way one has to keep their personal background and position in mind. The other women who responded in similar ways to experiencing an ardent feeling of responsibility in their jobs have one element in common: they are all women without immediate family responsibilities. Selina was married twice. Her first husband took a second wife because Selina couldn’t give birth to a child. She was married to her first husband at the age of 12 and had to live with the stigma of being a barren woman.

I knew then that I would not have much honour in that family and that the villagers would blame me for not having children (Selina).

She left her first husband and remarried after some years. The second marriage, however, turned out to be as unfortunate as the first as the second husband soon took another wife as well. Selina is still officially married to him, but the couple live apart.

Selina’s particular background might well be the reason why she reacted so strongly to her work, where she now gets the responsibility and appreciation she did not have in her former life. Not having immediate family responsibilities in the sense of having a husband and children to take care of leaves her with more ‘space’ which she fills by identifying with her work. The same is not true of married women with children, who need extra time and energy for their family life on top of their working life.

Mubina, the driving instructor, felt responsible for ensuring that the female driving trainees would not cause any financial problems for GK. As mentioned above (see p. 164) she felt proud of being called ‘ustad’ by others. She was married for three years before her husband died in a bus accident. Her husband was not very good, always demanding extra money from her parents. When she was a widow she had to work as a maid servant and later in the garments factory, where ‘they had no honour for women’. Her mother, who lives in the village, takes care of her child. So, like Selina, Mubina has more ‘space’ for work. She lives on her own in the hostel at Cox’s Bazaar. For some women work and job satisfaction thus turn out to be a substitute for the ideal happy family life they never had.
To take a further example, Hassina (see p. 165) used to get severely beaten by her husband. Once GK persuaded her to become the handicrafts cooperative manager at Deposhai she decided to leave her violent husband. He came back to her and she agreed to take him back on her own terms. She tolerates him in her house, but does not lead a very happy family life. She replaced her family life entirely with her work and gets her feelings of self worth from the work.

I used to hope my marriage would be good, but there was no luck in my fate. Now I am earning my own money, that is my only consolation (Hassina, manager of the handicrafts cooperative in Deposhai, 40, married).

5.8 GK's limitations in helping women to find employment elsewhere

Hassina, however, is one of the few women who have actually managed to get involved in 'non-traditional' employment activities beyond the GK premises. In this section I highlight the contrast between women's optimistic attitudes to their employment chances elsewhere and GK's limitations in enabling women to find work in 'non-traditional' fields outside the organisation itself.

Table 5.10 demonstrates that 71 per cent of the women had on the whole a positive attitude about their employment opportunities elsewhere. The majority thought themselves skilled enough in their fields to get a job in the area for which they were trained. The other option quoted by many women was working in a garment factory.
Table 5.10 Employment opportunities outside Gonoshasthaya Kendra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of women believing they have a possibility of finding employment elsewhere</th>
<th>71 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because they are confident and have special skills</td>
<td>47 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because women get jobs nowadays</td>
<td>6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because women can work in garment factories</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because they know of work places in the field they were trained for</td>
<td>4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>28 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women not believing they have a possibility of finding employment elsewhere</td>
<td>21 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because they do not have enough knowledge and skills</td>
<td>7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because they are disabled</td>
<td>11 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because work beyond GK is dangerous for women</td>
<td>30 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because there is no employment in the field they trained in</td>
<td>30 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because they are too old</td>
<td>4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other (women do not want to leave GK)</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of women who said they did not know enough about work opportunities elsewhere</td>
<td>8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Questionnaire survey of current GK employees, present study

The awareness of having gained a special skill not shared by other women was another way in which many women defined their sense of increased self worth.

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It gives them the advantage of having no female competition in the job market.

Women like Selina and Shongita were enormously proud of having been the first female workers in their field and having an official licence for their work.

*Question: How do you feel being the first woman in Bangladesh to do this kind of work?*

[Gleeful laughter] In Bangladesh I am the only woman to get the licence [for operating a boiler machine]. So you can guess that I feel very happy.

*Question: Anything else you feel?*

What else should I feel? Now everyone likes me very much [proud laughter]. Zaffrull-bhai [director] and everyone else there likes and appreciates me very much. So it makes me feel great (Selina, boiler-operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Shongita, who has been the personal chauffeur of the director and was the first female professional driver in Bangladesh, is very aware of her status. People know about her: they recognise her as the 'lady-driver' and identify her as the 'GK driver'.

*Question: You have been in the papers. I think after that people recognise your face. Is that right?*

Yes, many people know me. They still know me as the GK driver...

*Question: Do the villagers know about your work?*

Of course they know. When I was shown on TV everyone saw that (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, 30, abandoned with child).
Plates 5.3 and 5.4 Shongita: the 'lady'-driver
Shongita managed to become quite popular with other drivers once she managed to break the initial ice. At first she used to get harassed by other drivers and pushed off the road, but now people know and respect her. The traffic police do not molest her, but greet her with respect and usually welcome a little chat with her. I also remember one occasion when I was boarding a local bus with her to go to Savar. The bus driver immediately recognised her and when she took out the money to pay the fare for herself and for me (as she insisted on paying), he refused to take her money, regarding her as one of ‘them’.

Having unique skills made these women believe they had good chances in getting a job outside GK should the necessity arise. Kamrun, who is a machine operator at the printing press, is convinced of her ability to get a job in a printing press elsewhere since this is the first time women have been trained to operate printing machines in Bangladesh. Another female machine operator believes that this kind of training is not available elsewhere in Bangladesh, so that only few people can have access to it. Zohra also works at the printing press as a machine operator, as well as doing binding and camera-processing. The quotation below illustrates her increased self-esteem:

Learning a special kind of work is good because that has value of its own. If I would lose my job here, can't I then work somewhere else to earn my bread? (Zohra, printing press, 23, married)

Not all the women (21 per cent), however, regard their particular skills as valuable assets for finding jobs elsewhere. Those who referred to their jobs in a positive way were usually working in specific areas like the printing press, driving, maintenance of boiler machines and the jute-plastic workshop. Women working in these departments seemed optimistic about their chances of finding employment outside the organisation.

Drivers have good chances of finding a job with international donor agencies. Shongita, the director's ex-chauffeur currently works for UNICEF. She is proud of her licence, keeping it in special wrapping paper, and is aware of the fact that she got the job there because she learned a special skill in GK. Having UNICEF as an employer is also a completely different situation from being employed at a garment factory. UNICEF appreciates good workers and would never be able
to make someone redundant without good reason. Shongita knows that she has a secure job. The other drivers are also all very confident about having work opportunities with other NGOs. Some of the drivers at Cox's Bazaar had been sent out to work for UNHCR temporarily during floods, suggesting ongoing cooperation between GK and other international relief organisations.

Some of the jute-plastic workers, who used to work in GK, are now employed in a jute-plastic firm in Dhaka. The owner is a friend of the GK director and after a bad experience with his male workers he decided to employ women only in his firm. It is a small firm: about six ex-GK women now run the place. They are aware that they have a special value for the owner as they know about the incident with the former male workers, who had allegedly cheated the firm, with the result that the owner now thinks women are more reliable than men. Knowing this makes the women feel appreciated. They understand their skills are beneficial to the firm.

The boiler operators realise they are unique in Bangladesh. They are actually working as employees in the pharmaceutical branch GPL and cannot easily be replaced, which gives them a feeling of being needed. Like the drivers they have an official licence. After getting the licence they have to commit themselves to work for at least three years for GK. The job is therefore regarded as a more permanent type of employment.

The printing press is - like GPL - a separate firm, in which women are employed on a more fixed and permanent basis. In that sense it differs from the other 'men's jobs', which are run on a more experimental basis for demonstrative purposes. What gives the printing press a higher status than the other departments is therefore the fixed nature of the job and also the fact that it is done indoors, in its own separate, 'clean' and modern-looking building, whereas construction, welding and carpentry departments operate outdoors or in sheds.

In contrast to the positive accounts discussed above, women working in sections like construction, welding or carpentry usually had different attitudes to their work. According to the observation by Kabeer (1994:153),
... outdoor, manual or "dirty" work, hired status, arbitrary, casual or personalised terms of employment, are all qualities that are generally less valued by both men and women than "clean", indoor or desk jobs, self-employed status, and secure, well-defined conditions of employment.

Many women referred to particular jobs within GK as being preferable to others. At the top ladder of the job hierarchy were jobs in the printing press, in the antibiotics section and in pharmaceuticals. The antibiotics and pharmaceutical sections are both located within the pharmaceutical firm GPL. These jobs appear to be popular among the women because they reflect middle class aspirations for respectable ‘clean’, indoor desk jobs and they stand for fixed indoor employment.

I would like to learn a more advanced skill than this one [bakery]. You are a valued person here if you learn vaccination work, antibiotic work. The printing press is also more or less good. I could work outside then too (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

Most women from departments such as construction, welding and carpentry did not seem to believe they had much chance of getting jobs elsewhere with those particular skills.

I stay here only because there is nowhere else to go. I wouldn't get a job somewhere else, so I work here (Bina, construction worker, 30, married).

Bina sticks with the agency because she has no alternative. Arifa, on the other hand, who works in the welding section, dislikes her job for class-related reasons. She differentiates herself from the other women working in these sections who have no alternatives. She thinks GK should never have assigned her there in the first place. She felt betrayed because she was originally promised a ‘clean’, ‘indoor’ office job, but was then sent to the ‘dirty’ ‘outdoor’ welding section. She feels ashamed of her job because she thinks she is over-qualified. So she lies to her friends in the village about the type of job she is doing and tells them she is working indoors. Her disappointment with the job is evident:

I am the most educated person here. Do educated people work in a place like this? I will not work here anymore ... First I was told I would do office work, but later they gave me this welding job (Arifa, welder, 18, unmarried).

Bina and Arifa both have in common the fact that they regard the type of work they are performing as not enabling them to find employment elsewhere. The difference between the two women, however, is that Bina has hardly any
education and comes from a very poor background. As a result she has no other employment options, whereas Arifa, who has a higher level of education and comes from a more well-off family, is not working for survival reasons.¹⁰

On the other hand there are also women like Hanufa (a carpenter at GK), who do not consider manual work as 'dirty' and inappropriate. Hanufa has exceptional confidence in her skills. She even knows of places that employ female carpenters on a permanent basis because she was sent for training to one of them. Her real interest, however, lies in opening a furniture shop.

If they [GK] give me a certificate I could get the job there, but I don' t want to...I want to work two more years and then open a carpentry shop if I get a loan.

*Question: Is there demand for that?*

If you can get a shop close to the road then you can do it...It will be a small shop. Though I don't have that much education I can handle accounting and management.

*Question: Will you do it alone or with your husband?*

Not with the husband, because he doesn't know this work, if necessary I will take a few other women.

*Question: From where?*

From my village. I can get women there.

*Question: Skilled women?*

I will teach them (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

This quotation summarises the various ways women defined their sense of increased self-worth (see above section). Hanufa is performing ‘masculine’ work as well as any man and she does not feel ashamed of her work although it is ‘dirty’ outdoor work. She sees the value in having been trained in a particular skill that can easily get her a job outside, and believes she can make use of that skill by running her own furniture shop. She has the knowledge and capacity to teach her skills to other women if necessary.

The stories given above reflect women's perceptions of the type of training they had acquired in GK and their employment opportunities in the future. The
majority have developed great confidence in their capacities. In reality, however, only approximately one third of the women have successfully entered work in the areas for which they trained after leaving GK (Christian Aid Assessment Report 1994).

Some women have set up a tailoring shop and a laundry service in their home villages with a loan from GK. Others have opened small grocery shops. Quite a few women have bought sewing machines and take orders from their homes. One of the women I interviewed had left for BATA shoe factory and some of the women from the bakery were employed in a bread and biscuit factory. A few women, who were trained in the blockprinting and dyeing section were employed in the export processing zone or a ceramic factory. Several drivers at Cox's Bazaar were sent to work temporarily (six to seven months) for international organisations such as World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR and Shongita is the first of the drivers to be employed on a permanent contract by UNICEF. Maleka is the only woman in Bangladesh to run her own minibus (taxi) service. A handful of women are working in a jute-plastic firm in Dhaka. And Hassina is still the only GK woman who is working as a handicrafts cooperative leader in her home village.

GK does not have the capacity to keep on every single woman to whom it offers training. Some women are lucky and find employment at GPL, but the others usually move on to other factories in Savar or search for work in the recently established Export Processing Zone. This means that in reality the majority of women do not get the chance to apply their particular skill in the open market.

One of the major reasons for GK's limited capacity to ensure women employment elsewhere, particularly in the fields in which they have been trained, is obviously related to high unemployment levels in Bangladesh and lack of adequate infrastructure (hard industries). The other difficulty lies in the fact that social structures need to be questioned and this is a long ongoing process. Shireen Haq, an activist from the women's movement, argued that at this stage it was still too early to worry about finding the right jobs for women. Those issues would have to be thought of later, perhaps in ten years. What was crucial now was creating space for women: physical and mental space. Physical space involved, for
example, official women's corners at the village bazaar (market), where a certain amount of space was reserved for women traders. According to Shireen Haq this measure could only be effective if the government introduced it nation-wide. With mental space she referred to influencing people’s and employers’ minds. The garment factory phenomenon, for example, played a significant role in shaping people’s minds. It brought thousands of women on to the roads of Bangladesh. Suddenly women were to be seen in large numbers: they were visible to everyone in their new roles as workers and eventually people began to accept the association of women and industry. Similarly, women and ‘non-traditional’ occupations such as those promoted by GK have to be made visible to the people and employers.

Attempts were made by GK to access local markets for women’s cooperatives, but so far they had failed, which is why Shireen Haq's point about government cooperation is so significant. GK once tried to set up a welding workshop in a village bazaar. First the families of the women objected, but when they were convinced GK applied to the market committee for a place. The committee, however, refused them a place with the argument that having women in the market would draw customers away from the workshops run by men and that this would eventually create tensions. Another time GK tried to convince a metal workshop owner in Dhaka to employ its women. The owner himself agreed, but the male workers and manager opposed the idea believing that the presence of women in a firm would distract male workers and demoralise the work atmosphere. About six to seven years ago GK again tried opening a market in Savar bazaar. The idea was to have women open their own businesses, but under the protection of a GK market. GK was too much of a newcomer in that market and had not given the whole venture enough thought. It failed again as the GK businesses could not survive against local competition.

Views about approaches to women's entry into the market were divided amongst the development experts and academics with whom I spoke. Some of the economists thought GK's approach was too radical and that religious and cultural constraints would still be too powerful. They criticised GK for having forced 'non-traditional' jobs on women without having asked them whether they actually liked that kind of work. Others, especially NGO members, sociologists and
historians believed that now was the right time for more innovative approaches, arguing that women traders, women smugglers, women construction workers and women’s banks already existed, no matter how small the scale. It was agreed, however, that ‘sexuality’ would remain a major problem. As can be seen from GK’s failed experiments women’s entry into local markets clashes with people’s beliefs and superstitions (‘women in the market bring bad luck’, ‘women in the market are prostitutes’). The same applies to the idea of a few women working in a firm with several hundred men. One can understand that employers would not want to take on the extra risk of creating unnecessary tension, when so many men are available. Old industries such as textile mills are said not to employ women because the structures within these firms have already become too rigid. Male staff would not be flexible enough for new ideas and would resist any change. The newer industries like garments and electronics, on the other hand, were starting from scratch and were therefore open to employing an entirely new labour force that consisted mainly of women.

When asked which ‘non-traditional’ sectors held potential for women in Bangladesh the responses focused on higher level technical skills in the garment industries such as the operation of knitting machines, textile screen printing, machine embroidery, leather work and dyeing. Professional driving was mentioned and some people even suggested the entire public transport system should be handed over to women as this would have a major impact on public opinion. Driving, it was argued, only involved one woman sitting in a car, which entailed far less sexual tension than a few women in a factory full of men. A few other areas were mentioned such as laundry, catering, electrical and plumbing services. Most respondents agreed, however, that the notion of women in heavy industries was unrealistic.

5.9 Conclusion

GK is known for offering women training in ‘non-traditional’ skills and has been criticised for not ensuring more women jobs in those skills outside GK. From a strictly economic point of view GK’s approach of offering women ‘non-traditional’ training is not paying off. The donors are not getting enough quantifiable results.
GK, however, requires women to 'break with tradition' in many other ways than working in 'men's jobs' alone. It does this by asking them, for example, to leave their homes, to leave behind certain family responsibilities, to ride a bike, to wear men's clothes, to use 'masculine' tools and to have day to day contact with male strangers. To understand GK's achievement one has to look at it from a broader perspective. Women's lives are transformed in GK in different ways and not just because they are doing 'men's work'. 'Non-traditional work', or rather as Kabeer (1994:301) calls it 'new economic resources' have a strategic element, but contribute only partly to the changes taking place in women. My original idea was to examine the implications men's work might have for changes in women's lives, but I soon found out that work per se was not seen by the women at GK as the only aspect of change. Men's work was just an integral part of the overall approach of GK. There was more to it than merely the productive side. 'Collective relationships', to use Kabeer's (1994:301) phrase, played a significant role in women's changes, in the interaction that takes place at GK. I shall discuss the less tangible aspects of changes in women's lives in the following chapters.

Notes

3. For more detailed information on the Dhaka Export Processing Zone see BIDS (1994). The Export Processing Zone is situated near GK. It takes about 20 minutes on the bus to get there.
4. Conventional male guardians are usually either the women's husbands, fathers, uncles, fathers-in-law and sometimes even their sons. Women's guardians are expected to protect their virtue and honour.
6. See Lewis (1993) for a critique of prevailing concepts of female-headed households in the Bangladesh context, where he indicates that 'unequal relationships' also exist within female-headed households.
7. The women who had studied before coming to GK were usually not from the poorest classes. Their families owned some land. They were all between 15 and 25 years old. Their level of education was between class 3 and class 12. This reflects the current trend of women now having more access to education than in former days.
8. I am aware of the fact that I could have chosen other identity markers than the ones used in my citations. Given the need for brevity, however, these struck me as the most significant.

9. Recent studies on garment factory workers confirm the same trend although the majority of workers are unmarried women, see Kabeer (1995b) and Kibria (1995).

10. An interesting observation I would like to mention here is how my male transcriber (a student of political science) added his explanation in brackets to the original interview: [Now she has to work hard for her living, but before she came to GK she didn't have to work so much. That time she only did household chores. So she doesn't like her present hard working life that much.] Unfortunately I don't know if this is purely his interpretation of her situation or if he stopped translating verbatim and tried to give me a picture of her thoughts by summarising it in his own words. I do not therefore know, whether the disdainful attitude to 'only doing household work' reflects Begum's original thoughts or the male transcriber's. Some of the GK women did, however, refer to household work disdainfully when contrasting it with their 'hard work' at GK. I shall discuss this point at a later stage.


13. See also Cain et al. (1979) on women's life cycles.


15. See in this context Kabeer's (1995b) discussion of garment women's decreased liability status and insecurity of marriage trends.

16. Bhai means brother and is often used when referring to a person with whom you are on friendly terms with.

17. GPL is treated as a separate body in GK. It is now a big firm that was set up in the early 1980s and was employing almost entirely women in factory type jobs. It was the first firm in Savar to employ only women.

18. See in this context Sharma (1986:128-129), where she argues that some low status jobs like sweeping are also inappropriate for men. In her findings people would only take this type of manual labour as a last resort in times of extreme hardship.

19. Kamrun has in fact now left GK and is working on a supervisory level at a garments factory, a job she found through her brother's connections.

Chapter Six: Socio-political dimensions of empowerment in the GK collective

6.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I discussed how the type of work women perform at GK and the organisation as a workplace contribute to broadening women's horizons. With a few exceptions most women's conceptions of work and perceptions of their own potentials have changed. They have considered leaving their homes for pragmatic reasons e.g. survival. Many women started their working lives with negative attitudes towards formal work outside the home and were afraid and slightly intimidated by the demands of this new situation. After having overcome an initial phase of dislike and discomfort, however, they began to give formal work other meanings besides that of covering their essential needs. The survival background has not disappeared from the agenda, but women have redefined their attitude to formal work and discovered new purposes in their lives since joining GK.

In this chapter I point out other factors that have transformed women's lives. These go beyond GK's status as a workplace and women's realising their work potentials. Here I am interested in GK's function as a gender-sensitive organisation and the role it plays in providing a forum for interaction and the formation of new social relations. GK has a direct impact on women through its literacy and awareness-raising programmes. Its influence on a more indirect level is through providing women with a space to meet and interact with other non-blood-related people. The interaction takes place in a 'dedicated' space, away from home, away from village boundaries and surveillance. The interviews suggest that people learn from each other. The women with whom I spoke exchange similar stories of oppression and hardship and influence each other through their different experiences and lessons in life. They learn through observation and relate to each other by exchanging ideas and sharing emotions. In this process of learning and interacting the women begin to adopt alternative world views. Some of the women I spoke with polarised between the new 'urbanised', 'educated' lifestyle (i.e. the one they are adopting through their
involvement at GK) and that of the villages (i.e. more isolated lifestyle they led before coming to GK).

Almost all the women have clear-cut visions of the future and aspire towards more middle-class standards and ways of living. Educated, rich people become less intimidating as education becomes more available to the poor. I shall give examples of how the GK women perceive change when comparing their former lives, the lives of their mothers and that of ‘village women’ with their own and how they project their hopes onto future generations.

6.2 Images of ‘village women’ and village lifestyles

Most women at GK had ambiguous feelings about their village backgrounds. Before discussing the dichotomies women drew between village and urban lifestyles one has to keep in mind that when referring to the ‘home village’ women are speaking about different local spaces and times. In this collection of perceptions and memories of village life women’s perspectives are influenced in different ways by factors such as class, life cycle phase, region and marital status.

For some women the ‘home village’ is distant, located in more remote rural areas in Bangladesh that are far more conservative than other villages. Some women migrated from their original homes, with or without their families, because they lost their land for reasons such as river erosion, land fragmentation, sudden death or illness of the main earner. They came to settle in semi-urban areas like the villages around GK in search of alternative survival possibilities. Other women refer to their original home villages where they used to live with their parents, before they had to move to a different place with their husbands. For others, village images lie in the past, as they have been working and living in GK for many years. These women obviously have a different perspective on villages they visit only occasionally, compared to those women who live in nearby villages and commute to work daily.
In spite of the differences in terms of where the women came from and which places they identified as 'home', common patterns emerged from the interviews in women's stereotyped images of village lifestyle.

6.2.1. Isolation at 'home'

Women at GK often described their former lifestyle in the villages in terms of having 'no freedom', 'no mobility', 'no chance to mix with people', 'fewer friends' and 'no social life'. Foslema, who has been living in GK for the last ten years, recalls the time she lived in the village and refers to her former lifestyle as 'being surrounded by four walls'. But compared to her mother she did not stay isolated all her life:

My mother stayed at home all her life, but I left. I didn't spend all of my life in the corner of my house like her (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

In her detailed ethnographic study on 'cultural constructions of womenhood' in a Bangladeshi village, Kotalova (1996) uses the image of an onion to describe the social units which are most influential in women's lives. Figure 6.1 serves to illustrate Kotalova's onion circles dividing women's movements in space into various 'layers'. It depicts the boundaries between home (bari) and abroad (bidesh) and shows how these differ for women living in the villages and those involved in GK.
Figure 6.1 Spatial maps of women’s mobility

Space layers of woman living in villages

Space layers of woman involved in Gonoshasthaya Kendra

0.5-1.0 hour walk
1.5-2 hours by bus
8-9 hours by bus
by plane
In a Bangladeshi village the smallest unit is the household, followed by the wider homestead unit ‘bari,’ which usually comprises a group of households organised around common courtyards. ‘Para’, the neighbourhood, is a ‘territorial-cum-moral boundary surrounding a community’.

Though, for a visiting outsider and local children, the beginning and the end of a para are hardly noticeable, for village women a para boundary divides the world into home (bari) and abroad (bidesh). For the unmarried it surrounds the home (of their fathers); for the imported wives it encircles one of their homes (shashur bari). For both latter categories it is a boundary of their self-control, as their transgressions have implications for community’s reputation (Kotalova 1996:41).

Rahela, for example, lives in a village not too far away from GK, but, unlike other women from her village who came to work at GK, she has never left home. She felt uncomfortable talking about these issues during the interview. Although her husband is unemployed and hardly any money is coming in from their sons, she remains fatalist and rejected any notion of herself leaving the home to work, since ‘Allah the almighty is running the family’. Stuck with these traditional beliefs she refused to let her daughter-in-law go out to work.

My daughter in-law ... [silence for some seconds]. Since I never went outside, how can I let her outside ... as long as we are alive we will not let her go outside.

**Question:** What is your opinion about women going out to work, is it good?

No [very very low voice].

**Question:** Why, is it because it is forbidden in the religion?

[She laughs a bit] No, not the religion - neither me nor my mother or aunts ever went outside - that’s the reason (Rahela, village woman, 40, married).

The women at GK describe their mothers as stuck at home and without any idea of the ‘world outside’, of places other than home, since they could not see and move within this world beyond the home.
My mother didn't go anywhere, but I have been roaming around at home (bari) and abroad (bidesh). My mother was always in the village, she doesn't know East and West, she doesn't know anything. (Kudera, used to work in GK before, now shop keeper, 48, married).

The assumption is that mothers/typical village women do not know how to move around by themselves and would get lost immediately without the necessary 'road knowledge' one acquires when going out to work. Mothers/village women would not be able to 'roam around'. GK women, on the other hand, feel comfortable to go to work and 'roam around' (e.g. go to a fair, go clothes shopping), but in their past they remember being 'afraid to walk on the roads alone'. They also remember the early days at GK and how they were afraid of being approached by men on their way to work.

We were afraid of walking on the roads alone, we were afraid that some man might make a bad comment or come up and ask us something (Parvin, runs her own laundry service, 35, married).

Being a typical village girl my father thought [in the first days] I would not be able to find my way back [home from GK on my own]. (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Before, I worked only at home, I didn't know anything. I didn't know that women work outside. It is by going to GK that I learned something - the roads, how to catch a bus, all this. (Nargis, ex-GK worker, 23, now unemployed; her husband died during the fieldwork period).

The poor thing [her mother] hasn't even boarded a bus yet [she is laughing]. (Nasmun, shoe-making, 22, married, but husband left her after her pregnancy during the fieldwork period).

Usually a village woman's mobility remains well defined within the 'para' or village boundaries. The mothers of the GK women never really had to go anywhere particular; sometimes even their parents' home would be in the same village. Their use of space was limited and this fact was rarely contested. However, villagers in general (whether women or men) are not that keen on leaving familiar surroundings behind. Everything beyond the clearly-defined home and village boundaries is 'bidesh' i.e. abroad, foreign, unknown and slightly intimidating.
Separation from one's land, water sources and rice yielded from the fields that surround it, is always experienced as an immense discomfort ... To make use of food, water ... women and medical services abroad (bideshe), is believed to have detrimental consequences for a man's wellbeing. Young men may be instructed before embarking on a journey to avoid touching un-known people (Kotalova 1996:60).

GK women, on the other hand, are bound to have extended mobility through the simple fact of being forced to transgress home and village boundaries to get to work. They do not move only within their own 'paras' or to make the occasional visit to their parents' home. They enter ‘bidesh’ territory (see Figure 6.1) which also involves using public transport that carries them away from the 'bari' into other spaces. During this travel to work and in some cases even travel to distant places (e.g. Cox's Bazaar in the south of Bangladesh, see Plate 4.1) or even abroad (e.g. training in the Philippines) they encounter 'bideshi' (strangers) and have to interact with them. Road knowledge is necessary as well as communication with 'bideshi' i.e. the need to behave in a different way. GK women's newly-acquired ability to communicate with strangers will be discussed at more length in the following chapter.

6.2.2. Education and information

The women at GK linked former restrictions on their mobility in the villages to their limited access to educational facilities.

In those days literacy was not so common and we were not allowed to go out of the house after the age of seven (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

Most of the women's mothers were illiterate and therefore described as having no knowledge of the outside world - knowledge and information that goes beyond the family/village surrounding.

Those who are illiterate like my mother would not understand anything about social or national matters (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

It is necessary, however, to keep the time factor in mind. In the older women's generation education was not such an issue either for men or for women.
Batliwala's (1993) highly-detailed account of concepts and practices of empowerment of women in South Asia draws on historical interpretations of education.

There is total agreement on all hands that education is central to the process of empowerment, whether of poor women or men [my emphasis]. There is also consensus that in the context of empowerment, the definition, shape and context of education changes radically. The need for such a change arises from the historical role that education has played in reinforcing social and gender hierarchies (Batliwala, 1993:14).

Batliwala highlights the elitist approach to education reserved for the dominant classes; its method is usually based on memorising and reproducing texts, and particularly religious ones, rather than questioning and exploring. Whereas Batliwala refers to dominant classes' memorising religious texts, my interviews with the older women evoked images of illiterate Bangladeshi peasant women learning the Quran by heart. This seems even more paradoxical, as the Quran is written in Arabic and not their own language. Rather than having had the chance to read and write the basics of their own language, women were taught to cite the holy Quran in Arabic.

In those days girls were not usually sent out to school. So I learnt my prayers [namaz] and cited the Quran at home (Shamsun, village woman around 40, no formal work experience, married, but husband has a second wife).

Majilla, on the other hand, criticises the madrassas (religious schools) for not 'teaching you your own language'. She convinced her brothers to follow her example by depicting the benefits of joining an NGO:

Many people have learned through those who have gone to the villages to build up organisations that education is something valuable ... After the formation of a shamittee (village organisation) they opened a school and gave books to the students. So now many village girls have learned how to read and write. Two of my brothers study in the madrassa. They have learned about prayers and fasting, but they have not learned Bangla. In my family I am the first to take education. People used to taunt me saying 'look at her, learning how to read and write at such an old age, greedy to get a job' ... At that time I was living with my husband. My brothers used to come to visit me. They'd flick through my books. So I said to them 'learn to read these books, you should join the shamittee and study seriously (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).
What is so fascinating is the way Majilla juxtaposes two popular approaches towards education: on the one hand that of the NGOs, and, on the other, the religious madrassa schools. These two types of institution have begun to compete in the recruitment of young people into their respective educational circles. The madrassas have been getting more and more concerned and agitated over the increasing activities of NGOs within the villages. Not only are the NGOs drawing away potential new members of the madrassas (e.g. village youngsters) by teaching them something more useful than just 'prayers', but they are also involving predominantly women in educational and training programmes, which does not suit the ideology of the madrassas at all.

Nowadays women in the villages are getting more access to information from outside the immediate localities through the rise of media (TV, radio) and the influence of rural development programmes. They usually have a good knowledge of the existing NGOs and loan possibilities in their surroundings. They have also heard the name of Khaleda Zia before or have seen her on TV, but - unlike the GK women - none of the village women I spoke with knew who she was. They did not have the sophisticated level of political awareness GK women had. When asked what Khaleda Zia did one response was for example:

Golpo kore [she talks].

Question: Did she ever come to this area?

I don't know. You are asking us [my type of people] so many high questions, but we are not the proper people for you, we don't know these things (Sahera, village woman, 25, married, but husband was already married to another woman when he married her).

Sahera explains her lack of knowledge in political matters in terms of her illiteracy. Also Rahela takes up the identity of an 'illiterate village woman' by pointing out that only those who are educated can go outside:

Question: What is the problem if a woman goes outside without her husband, can you explain it to this foreigner [pointing at me].

We became old, how can we go outside - only those who are going to school or college, they go outside (Rahela, village woman, 40, married).

The village women I spoke with did not question class hierarchies and continued to identify themselves as illiterate. Women at GK, however, are challenging
precisely this concept of 'the educated/higher class/richer people' being the ones who can go out to school and to work. GK women are blurring the boundaries between the classes by claiming their rights to education and work.

Tahera explains the difference between her own situation and that of village couples in the quotation below. She and her husband both live and work in GK, where they have the opportunity to meet people from different areas and therefore have a wider scope for conversation. They believe the atmosphere and interaction with others at GK broadens their horizons.

Village couples talk about village people. We move around very much, are on the streets, can watch many people and have social communication. That’s why we discuss more things (Tahera, pump operator, 20, married).

This lack of exposure to interaction with other people beyond the immediate family/kinship/para boundaries is one of the major differences GK women mention when comparing themselves to ‘typical village women’.

When a person can mix with many people in one place the atmosphere becomes different. By mixing with ‘educated people’ the whole behaviour of a person changes (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

I couldn’t mix with anybody in the village; now I mingle with many people from home [bari] and abroad [bidesh] ... I have learned the language, manners and conversation ... I have become more intelligent than before. I have learned how to mix with others (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

Unlike the village women I spoke to, GK women do not identify themselves as illiterate. On the contrary, they believe themselves to be considered as ‘smart’ in their families and communities because of ‘mixing’ and working with ‘people from outside’. ‘Outsiders’ are defined as educated people from outside the village (bidesh). So the argument is that once you leave the ‘illiterate village/home (bari) atmosphere’ and mix with the ‘educated society’ from ‘outside’ (bidesh) you adapt to the lifestyle and behaviour of the outsiders i.e. the educated.

In the village the lifestyle is different. Here is an educated environment [shikito poribesh] and I pretend to be educated also in my behaviour. I act like them and talk like them [bhodro bhasha i.e. the language of the bhodrolok] and that is how I am learning (Najma, laundry, 20, married).
GK women also believe themselves to have gained wider identities, beyond those expressed purely in ‘family’ terms, such as ‘devoted wife’ or ‘nurturing mother’. They realise they now have an identity as an individual, which does not automatically entail being linked to a male family member. The women are not simply referred to as wife of X or daughter of Z, but instead - at least within GK - they are now treated as a separate person, as individuals in their own right and are called by their own names and even have their own postal address (tikhana) at GK. They are discovering a new side of themselves and a new feeling of independence, which neither they nor their mothers had experienced before.

My mother and aunts were indoors and listened to whatever their husbands said, but we have gone out, are earning our own living, moving around on our own ... They stayed in the house, because they had to give love and care to those at home and rear the children (Najma, laundry, 20, married).

Changes as regards people’s attitudes towards education, however, have also begun to take place in the villages over the last years and usually more so in those villages where NGOs have been active.

Women were not much educated before. They stayed behind the curtain [veil]. Now they have come out from behind the curtain and become smart. Now they understand what is good or bad and why people are so poor. Now they know how to stand on their own feet so that they won’t remain poor. Now they understand the importance of education and know they can only learn if they come outside (Hassina, manager at handicrafts cooperative in Deposhai, 40, married).

This trend even had spill over effects on people like Rahela, who, on the one hand continue to hang on to traditional norms (see p. 186), but, on the other hand, are easily influenced by current fashions. I agree with Hashemi and Schuler, who believe conformity to be

... an important feature in popular religious practice. People perceive certain ways of living as ‘right’ based not only on how the Quran is interpreted, but because these are the ways that they and their fellow Muslims are living. Seeing alternative behaviours opens the door for alternative interpretations of Islam (Hashemi and Schuler 1992:18).

In Rahela’s case, therefore, educating her daughters becomes necessary nowadays, because ‘everybody else does so’.
Question: If you want to marry off your daughters what is the benefit of giving them education?

Isn't it bad to keep them completely illiterate nowadays? (Rahela).

Rahela, however, does this not because she genuinely believes education would benefit her daughters and help them achieve something in life, as GK women would argue. She is educating her daughters, because this has become a popular trend in the village. It appears to her as the normal and appropriate thing to do, because others are also doing it. Since 'everybody is doing it' it would 'look bad' if she did not follow the trend. The difference between women like Rahela and the GK women in this context therefore lies in their conscious decision to plan their children's future, rather than blindly following general trends.

6.2.3 Aspirations for children

Majilla complains about the lack of access to knowledge in her village, ignorance of family planning issues and non-awareness of the significance of education for progress in life. Conventional roles for women and girls remain unchallenged and unquestioned.

I come from a typical village. There was no environment of education. Young children catch fish, collect paddy grains, but God put sense in my mind, so I left my village and came here. I don't even feel like going back to my village. There is too much poverty. People are so typical. In every home there are five or six children... They can't feed the children properly, can't give them proper clothing...

Question: Do they ask you to have more children?

Yes they do, but I say 'please don't talk about that anymore'. Then they say 'Isn't there still hope for another son?' (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married)

Majilla portrays life in the village she comes from in negative terms, associating it with poverty and illiteracy. She could not see any future for herself and her family in the village and decided to leave, hoping to give her two children better prospects.
Question: Did your mother worry about your education the way you do with your children's education?

My mother never thought about these things. If I had not thought about it my children would also have remained illiterate. With this in mind I left my village and came here. My life would have been alright, but my children would have missed an education ... (Majilla).

The mothers are described as being unaware of many issues - 'they did not think about it'. One particular complaint that reoccurred in the interviews was the parents’ lack of family planning awareness and incapability to 'take proper care of the children'.

I have two children and I never want to have more. Two are enough if we can take care of them properly. My parents did not think about that ... they thought giving birth is the major thing. But to feed them, clothe them, send them to school ... they didn't think of all that (Parvin, runs her own laundry service, 35, married).

According to the GK women their parents have failed to map out a future for their children, in particular for their daughters, whereas they themselves have very clear cut visions and typical middle-class aspirations for their daughters. They want their daughters to be educated, have an established life like a man and eventually get married - ideally to an educated man - but not without having the security of a decent job. They hope their daughters can live a better life than themselves, using education to their advantage. A proper education guarantees better jobs and hence a better life. By better jobs women mean middle-class, 'clean', desk jobs. Office jobs or professional employment as doctors, lawyers or engineers were usually the jobs preferred for both sons and daughters.

I want to give her the highest education, it doesn't matter how hard this will be for us. I want to make her a 'big person' (manusher moto manush korbo i.e. I want to make her become a socially well-established person).

Question: Which job would you prefer for her?

I like engineer or advocate.

Question: And for your son?

No difference, everybody is equal (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).
Tied in with GK women's aspirations for their children is their attitude towards family planning, which is no longer a taboo topic for them. In fact it is widely practised amongst the GK women who tend to take the pill. They would talk about the subject with me and even my male translators without any inhibitions unlike some of the village women I spoke with. Rahela, who has seven children, reacted to the family planning topic with embarrassment for example:

*Question: Is it good to have so many children or is it better to have fewer?*

[Shy embarrassed laughter - silence]

*Question: Is there any problem if you have many children?*

[Silence] - we are people from an older generation (Rahela).

According to Hashemi and Schuler (1992:1), however,

recent evidence from [their] own and others' research, as well as steadily rising rates of contraceptive use in Bangladesh (40 per cent of married women of reproductive age in 1991), suggest that norms relating to fertility and contraception have begun to change. The authors relate this recent phenomenon to a 'pro-family planning interpretation of Islam' promoted by both the state and NGOs (which is not surprising given the donors' strong interest in population control). People in the villages are increasingly receiving these 'pro-family planning messages' via media (TV, radio) and rural health visitors. The main content of this family planning campaign is that contraception is consistent with Islam and that it would be 'sinful' to raise children one cannot provide for (Hashemi and Schuler 1992:3).

The interviews I had with the younger village women seem to confirm this trend. They have less inhibitions to talk about family planning issues as compared to the older generation women, such as Rahela.

My parents did not take that much interest in our education, because we were four brothers and sisters, but if we would have only been two then they wouldn't have had to worry (Majeda, village woman, 19, married, no formal work experience).
Sahera believes in the benefits of family planning as well. In her case the proximity of GK - she lives right opposite - plays an important role as GK health workers come to her village distributing the pill free of cost.

They come every month twice and distribute them in every house to whoever wants them (Sahera, village woman, 25, married, but husband was already married to another woman when he married her).

She does not want to have more than one child because she feels responsibility for securing the well-being of this one child. She herself is illiterate and she does not work outside the home, but she sends her daughter to school at GK. It was her idea to send her daughter to school and she retains all the responsibility for her daughter's education, since her husband 'is hopeless in these things'. Unlike Rahela, she does not send her daughter to school to conform with 'everybody else'. For her it means offering her daughter the chance to lead a better life, which she herself has missed.

The idea [of having only one child] came because we don't have money, we don't have land and property. Is it enough if we just bring them into this world - how can we make them manush [socially well established]? If we cannot give them anything they will complain later ... If I had had an education I wouldn't have had to be married into this place ... that's why I am having this misfortune now (Sahera, village woman, 25, married, but husband was already married to another woman when he married her).


6.2.4. Cultural constraints

GK women's descriptions of 'typical' village women's behaviour/their mother's behaviour were stereotyped: shy and timid behaviour and an inability to take care of themselves. They had images of village women as 'helpless creatures' in need of constant protection and totally dependent on their guardians. Village women were described as being afraid of people - especially outsiders (bideshi) and tending to behave in ways that would not risk social disapproval and potential exclusion from the 'shomaq', the community council. The interviews suggest that socio-cultural constraints and village surveillance i.e. 'bad talking' are major factors constraining women's behaviour.
According to Kotalova (1996) women's transgression of village boundaries has implications for the community's reputation. Gatekeepers of the community's reputation are usually the men involved in the 'shomaj'. These men are the community's most influential figures.

Reflection on shomaj's collective sanction is implicit in expressions of affirmation like "everybody says ..." (shobai bole), "everybody does so ..." (shobai kore) or disapproval (rejection) - "people will speak badly" (manshi mondo koy). Perhaps the commonest mode of judging individual actions is anticipation of what people will say. A grave misdeed may lead to a temporary exclusion from shomaj of the offender and his family ... The maintenance of the proper, natural and moral order of society - dhormo - is the ultimate justification of the shomaj's intervention in the individual and household sphere (Kotalova 1996:41-42).

The quotation below describes the behaviour of Majilla's mother:

My mother walks in the streets covering her face with a veil. She doesn't look at people's face properly. She prays regularly. But I can't do that at present. I pray only on Fridays.

Majilla wants a different life from her mother's:

... because times are changing. People don't lead their lives the way people of the past did. I want my life to be like that of modern people. You know how people live in the villages! (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married)

GK women tend to differentiate themselves from 'traditional' women. For example, Arifa, whose original home is in Noakhali - one of the more conservative corners of Bangladesh - believes that the women in her village would not be able to lead a similar lifestyle to hers. They would be afraid to live like her. Whenever she visits the village she acts like one of them and adapts to the village atmosphere hiding her 'freer' lifestyle behind a veil. She makes the choice of leading a double life: when in the village she follows the expected behavioral norms, but when away from her village she leads the 'free' lifestyle she now prefers.

Dhaka's life is good. I can mix with anyone here. [But] if I go outside without a veil in the village everyone will say 'that girl is bad' (Arifa, welder, 18, unmarried).
Some GK women remember how they used to behave like ‘typical village girls’.

I used to be covered up to my head in clothes ... As a village girl I used to feel shy to face men (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

I didn’t know what to talk about then. And there were also those inhibitions that a woman should not talk much to other people. People would think badly of it. Or if I went to some place with somebody people would give it a bad name. So I abstained from doing those things (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

It is also interesting how GK women perceive women from conservative areas such as Cox’s Bazar after having been sent to do rehabilitation work there and hence being confronted with them. They depict women from these ‘traditional spaces’ as ‘purdasin’ i.e. women following extremely strict versions of purdah.

They always wear veils. The veil is a must during daytime and they bring umbrellas too. Most of the time they came out at night ... We told them ‘come with us, we will give you work’. But they don’t like jobs. Women from there don’t go out, they always stay in the house (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

When I asked how GK women would react to the religious leaders’ objection to their working in public, many of them replied defiantly:

The Imam says ‘don’t go outside’, but if I was lying on my deathbed no Imam would come and provide for me! (Razia, welder, 40, widow)

If I followed their rules I would have to stay at home rather than work.

Question: What would you say to them about that?

What is there to say? Would they give me rice? Would they lend me clothes? Of course they wouldn’t! (Kudera, shop owner, 48, married)

Others reacted with less outrage to the question and preferred to approach the issue by defending their identity as workers. They protected the images of a female worker by simultaneously representing themselves as ‘good workers’ as well as ‘good muslims’. They emphasised their double identity by distinguishing themselves from other women who might follow strict purdah on the outside (e.g. women wearing a burqa while entering public space), but who could be ‘bad’ on
the inside. They argued that the mere fact of going out to work and not observing *purdah* in the strict sense did not turn them into 'bad women' and disbelievers. One woman described her personal interpretation of *purdah* as the 'real *purdah*, meaning prayers, speaking the truth and maintaining *roza*. Others challenged the strict norms of *purdah*, arguing that a *burqa* alone could not guarantee a woman's integrity.

Some women wear *burqa*, but do wrong things - I wear pants and shirt, but my mind is fresh (Tahera, pump operator, 20, married).

Work is better than sitting at home, because there are also women who sit at home, but are not so good. They do some bad things, but we never do bad things (Kamrun, printing press, 27, married).

Rather than sitting around at home we are supporting ourselves by going out to work. We are maintaining our dignity. What's bad about that? There are so many who wear a veil yet do bad things underneath it. It should be alright if we don't do things like that. (Najma, laundry, 20, married).

As long as you keep your 'mansamman' there is nothing wrong in going out to work, instead of sitting idle at home (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).

These quotations illustrate how women have defined new values for their behaviour by labelling work as 'good' and sitting around at home as 'bad' and 'idle' in order to justify their decision to go out to work. While most women defended their virtue by presenting themselves as good women with a 'fresh mind' and differentiated themselves from women who sit 'idly' at home, one woman went a step further by reconstructing notions of sexuality and honour and turning them upside down. She defended her work identity and honour by desexualising and demystifying herself and argued that *purdah*, as an act of concealing the body, is far more sexual and tempting than exposing the body.

Anything that is concealed draws curiosity. Whenever a thing is under cover it gives rise to more curiosity. Now just because I go around without covering my face the men do not bother to look at me anymore, but they used to before when I still covered my face (Foslema, carpentry, 26, abandoned).

GK women also differentiate themselves from 'typical village women' by making it sound as though the latter are either not interested in working outside the home/village or not capable of performing the kind of work requested in GK. Village women, for example, would never do the type of agricultural work
everyone in GK is supposed to do as it is considered indecent for a woman. Nor would village women be prepared to work too far away from home. They would not be willing or flexible enough to do men’s work i.e. ‘hard’ ‘tough’ work:

    Not everybody can work as hard as we do, so many women quit GK (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

Majilla, who used to work at GK in the carpentry section and is now working in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ), gave another reason why village women could not perform efficiently in outdoor jobs:

    GK makes women strong ... A village woman will not be able to start at raptani (EPZ). That’s what I think.

    Question: Why?

    Our village women are very scared of strangers [bideshi] (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

Typical village women are depicted as ‘scared of strangers’: they would not know ‘how to behave with strangers’ or how to talk to them. As already mentioned above a ‘bideshi’ (literally foreigner) is practically anyone who does not belong to the community. Shongita feels that, with her GK background, she can now help the women in her village to look for jobs by correcting their ‘unsocial’ behaviour:

    I help them. If they are illiterate I tell them how their behaviour should be, because I know that the girls of my village are not so social (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).

6.2.5. Patriarchal constraints

Most of the village women I spoke with are aware of the patriarchal constraints they are caught in, but do not seem to challenge these as overtly as GK women do. Sahera, for example, who boldly described her husband in his absence as a useless simpleton (‘he is hopeless’, ‘he is a half mad type’, ‘he doesn’t understand’, ‘he is not clever’, ‘he doesn’t know how to talk with people’), still accepts his official dominance:
We have to increase our family income by both going out to work, but his opinion is different ‘you have to live on what I give you’. He doesn’t let me go outside, that’s why I have to stitch blankets at home. It is going to ruin my eyes, won’t it? (Sahera, village woman, 25, illiterate, married, but second wife.)

She is a strong minded and clever woman, but instead of questioning her husband’s order not to go out to work, she accepts it, although she personally would prefer outside work to home-based work.

Majeda, a young recently-married village woman, also blames her husband and her fear of ‘bad talking’ for not working outside. She abides by the notions of shame in her dutiful role as a ‘notun bou’ (newly married wife).

We who are from the villages, we feel shy, but it generally becomes OK after six to eight months.

Question: Then what is the problem?

It looks bad at the beginning.

Question: May God never be so cruel, but if your husband would die, would you work outside?

If my husband would forbid me to do it before his death, then I would not do it (Majeda).

Even though both women themselves would like to work outside the home they stick to the easier option of not challenging the supremacy of their husbands. Sufia, who went to GK training in the handicrafts section for only a few months and had to leave GK as soon as she got married, behaves like these two young village women. Her own mother was abandoned by the father and Sufia suffered abuse and maltreatment from her stepmother. She still does not dare to challenge either her father’s or her husband’s authority. Sufia does not even question the fact that her husband can beat her if she is disobedient. She seems to interpret beating as a common fact of life.
Now I have married. What would people say if I work now? They would say 'she is married now and leaves the husband behind to go to work. Is that why she got married?' ... Suppose someone tells him - even if it is not true - that your wife has done such and such, has done this with that sort of a person, then how will he feel?

*Question: Do you think he could beat you?*

Of course he could beat me. He hasn't beaten me yet, but he could do (Sufia, GK drop-out, 18, married).

Most GK women remember their own, their mother's or other women's oppression (see Chapter Five). The quotation below demonstrates how they now differentiate themselves from 'oppressed women':

Whatever my father dictated my mother had to listen to. He beat her often. Of course he did. Men of the older days were living in a different atmosphere, but now the atmosphere has changed. Girls of today can work. They can say that we will work to support ourselves and won't tolerate being beaten ... Why should we tolerate so much scolding and beating? But for them [mothers] it's not like that. They manage all household chores and still tolerate all the beatings ... My father punished my mother, scolded her and swore in our presence ... he beat my mother so much, [that's when I thought] I'd rather go out and work, but I won't be beaten like my mother (Mimosa, jute-plastic fabrication, 24, abandoned).

Razia remembers being beaten by her in-laws and then kicked out of the house after her husband's death. Selina remembers how she suffered in her role as a co-wife just like her own mother, but is proud of how she then managed to take her destiny in her own hands. She not only managed to escape the oppressive lifestyle her mother was forced to endure, but also, now, supports her mother (since her father's death). She has even succeeded in getting her mother out of her isolation at home by making her come to GK to collect her money.

My father married again and again. He wasted all the money ... My mother had to face a lot of poverty and hardship ... When my father was alive she never left the house. But now she has to leave her house in order to get her money (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Rahima has bad memories of her marriage. Her husband pressurised her family into paying more dowry; he used to beat her regularly and restricted her mobility to the house.
Everything had to be according to his words, but now I am free. There is no-one to say anything. Now there is no scolding or beating (Rahima, carpenter, 35, separated).

She differentiates herself from the women in her village who are still restricted in their mobility and totally dependent on their husbands:

I can stay outside until late at night, but those who have husbands they can’t ... Their husbands would scold them. They say to me ‘you are in a good position without a husband’.

Shongita was abandoned by her husband due to unmet dowry demands, but now she resists any notions of paying dowry for her daughter:

I won’t pay dowry. I’ll look for a good boy, but I won’t pay dowry. I won’t make any demands either. I’ll give my daughter whatever I can afford, but I won’t conform to any demands. I would not marry my daughter to such a person (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).

Shongita is also adamant about her daughter’s education and would not be willing to accept her son-in-law’s objections, even though traditionally the parents’ responsibility is handed over to the son-in-law and his family once the couple are married:

If her husband would not want it, I’d convince him. I would bear the expenses (Shongita).

Rahima is another example of a woman who now resists violence and intimidation:

I was afraid to talk to other people. Now I am not afraid anymore. Now they [the villagers] are afraid to talk to me ... I learned it [speaking] from mixing with other people ... I learned everything [how to communicate] after I came here [GK].

**Question: Did this help you in your life?**

Yes. Now nobody can beat me like before in my house. Now I can also beat him or her. Besides that I can also go to the police or to court (Rahima, carpentry, 35, abandoned).

This also shows that women like Rahima are now capable of accessing support mechanisms when needed. They know where to go to and how to approach public institutions like the police or the court.
Majilla feels she has learned through observing oppression in her own village.

In my village many women got beaten up by their husbands ... Now when I go to the village they say to me 'sister, you have done a very good thing by leaving this village'. So I knew before, but after coming here [GK] I learned even more (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

Nargis on the other hand said she had not thought about either her own situation or that of other women before coming to GK.

The moment I took the job I realised with how much difficulty and suffering I had lived and that there were others like me who lived in distress (Nargis, ex-GK worker, 23, now unemployed; her husband died during the fieldwork period).

Women like Nargis have gone through periods of hardship and witnessed oppression in their own lives. In encountering other women in GK with similar stories they started thinking about others and feeling solidarity with others.

6.3 Learning and social interaction in GK

In the previous section I showed how GK women tend to construct dichotomies between their village histories and the 'brave new world' they are experiencing at GK, outside the village boundaries. I shall now discuss two further aspects of women's perceptions of their own transformations. The first regards GK's literacy and awareness-raising programmes and the significance of group meetings within the overall development strategy. The second concerns women's interaction in GK and the role friendship and 'adda' (hanging out with others for a chat) play in promoting collective relationships and solidarity.

6.3.1 The adult education programme

GK has a long history of non-formal education programmes. The education project consists of a primary school within the GK campus, village schools, functional literacy classes for GK workers and an educational programme for the Nari Kendra trainees.
A GK Report from 1986 describes the training objectives and basic principles for its paramedics and Nari Kendra trainees as follows:

... beginning with [the] individual's own knowledge and experience, de-mystifying knowledge and making it accessible to more people and building the confidence of trainees in their own abilities (GK Report 1986:5).

GK's training consists of three key elements:

The first is making knowledge accessible and meaningful to people through the adult education programme, skills training and participation in GK meetings. The second element is having people, in particular women gain their own experience while they are learning, observing, working, living and communicating with others within the GK boundaries. Some participants also gain experience beyond the GK Savar campus, for example in GK subcentres across Bangladesh, in relief projects at the coastal areas or overseas when sent abroad, for further training. The third element is building up women's confidence and making them believe in their own potential, for example by realising they can do a job just as well as a man.

Adult education is a compulsory part of GK's vocational training programme. GK's target is to keep people in school for at least five years in order to avoid them lapsing back into illiteracy. Literacy classes used to run parallel to vocational training. Now trainees who are illiterate have to go through a preliminary training period of six to ten months during which they receive basic literacy and numeracy classes. Literacy is defined as the ability to read a Bengali newspaper and to write full sentences. Trainees with some education still have to attend the adult education course for at least one month in order to learn GK-specific subjects such as history (especially regarding the language and the liberation movement), women's rights and women's situation in Bangladesh and basics in health and nutrition.

GK's approach to health as part of an integrated development programme targeted at people's basic needs is apparent in the educational programmes.
[We learn] about many things, the body and health ... what to do when you grow old, spend your money carefully, save some money from now on ... They advise us to maintain good health and not have too many children. They ask us to explain it to our husbands and even if the husbands demand it, they say 'don't do it' ... They advise us to drink water from the tubewell ... They tell us about certain medicines, they advise us about child care and injections for the children (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

The adult education programme is obviously perceived as access to knowledge that goes far beyond mere literacy and numeracy skills. The women learn about health, nutrition, family planning, childcare and hygiene matters. The women's health consciousness made them take on new roles in their communities.

Villagers listen more to the women from GK than before and ask their advice in matters such as family planning, nutrition and health. GK women get identified as members of an organisation *i.e.* 'the GK women'. In some cases women were identified with GK specifically as a health organisation and therefore labelled as 'the medical women'. This is an example of how GK women can serve as a link between the organisation and the communities, offering the latter a service.

When someone is sick they ask me what should be done. I give advice and if someone is very sick I advise to take the patient to the hospital ... They say I work at the 'medical' [hospital], so I know many things about medicines. I tell everyone about many things so everyone thinks well of me (Zohra, printing press, 23 married).

If someone has an ulcer or abscess I tell them to wash it with warm water, grind neem leaves and raw tangerine and apply it onto the affected area. Then the mats, bed sheets, quilts and own clothes must always be clean. I tell them these things ... They know that I work in GK and take health classes. People come over to take suggestions from me (Mimosa, jute-plastic fabrication, 24, abandoned).

6.3.2 Participating in meetings

Having an integrated development/empowerment approach GK incorporates class and gender-related issues into its educational programmes. Women's participation in the general monthly meetings plays a significant part in the adult education programme. Although I came to understand during my fieldwork
period that the meetings and ‘awareness raising’ agenda per se had lost part of its original vibrancy and enthusiasm - a phenomenon common to most other NGOs in Bangladesh - I still believe it offers an important learning space for the women. Women's issues are still a significant part of GK's syllabus.

In GK meetings take place on different levels. Each workshop, for example, has its own departmental meeting on a weekly basis, which tends to be limited to production issues only. The general monthly meeting on the other hand has various functions. General announcements are made. It is also the venue where all workers, doctors and staff are kept informed of GK's production and commercial side. Each department singles out a spokesperson who then delivers an updated report of that particular workshop in front of the gathered crowd. Any major problems faced by that workshop which were not solved internally are brought forward for general discussion at the monthly meeting. The monthly meeting also serves as testing ground for new organisational initiatives and the introduction of GK internal rules for the newcomers. Overall it works rather well in providing an opportunity for regular self-evaluation and gives the impression of aiming at maintaining a certain degree of accountability towards its workers.

The awareness-raising elements of the GK meetings could take the form of a lecture on a particular informative subject or centre around preparations for the women's marches or be a discussion amongst the participants.
Question: Do they talk about the situation of women in Bangladesh in those meetings?

Yes. They say a lot of things about it like tortures inflicted by husbands ... or about women being left by their husbands and why they had to take a job, what problems they had with having children.

Question: Did they ask the women these kind of things?

Yes.

Question: Did the women talk about all these problems?

Yes, they talked about everything. You know I felt really good about that.

Question: Did they give any suggestions?

Yes they gave advice ... They organised special meetings for women's issues once or twice a month. At least one woman from each department has to come, no matter how high the work pressure is.

Question: They do not have this kind of thing at the export processing zone?

No, they don’t.

Question: You cannot discuss your problems there?

Your problems can go to hell, all they are interested in is your work! (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

In the meetings women are also encouraged to carry their new thoughts into the villages.

They talk about how women are oppressed, why they are oppressed, how we should take initiatives against it ... They also say 'go to the villages and spread your knowledge' (Mahmuda, security post at GK, 24, unmarried).

One of the objectives of GK's empowerment strategy is to kindle feelings of solidarity with other people within the GK collective as well as with the poor and oppressed outside the organisation. For example, during one of the meetings I attended, I witnessed a box going round collecting donations for the flood victims.
The people at GK who are themselves just able to get by are still prepared to donate money for those who are even worse off than them.

Those that went there [disaster areas] all made donations and with that money houses were built ... We liked the work there a lot because we all worked together unitedly ... They [the villagers] cried a lot when we went back [to Savar] (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

During my fieldwork period I had the opportunity to observe GK emergency programmes. Once everybody at GK, workers, staff, doctors, bosses gathered together at midnight to bake bread for the flood victims. They had set up a huge makeshift bakery outside the women’s hostel and literally worked all night to have the bread ready next morning. The atmosphere was great. Children were still up and hopping through the rows of workers; the people were chatting and making jokes. I felt the presence of an extraordinary strong unity and intimacy amongst the GK people at that moment. Being able to help others in crisis situations gives GK women a lot of satisfaction. Razia told me she was hoping other women could have a similar experience to hers.

I've been facing hardships and now I am better off. I want other women to have a happy life as well (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

Women are poor here [in Bangladesh]. When I had no job I had lots of problems. I can understand their situation ... but if they start working like us, sure their situation will change, why not - didn’t I change, sure it will change, sure it will (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).

By promoting notions of solidarity, unity and collective awareness organisations like GK give an alternative to common images of the poor as wretched beggars and hopeless fatalists. Most people in GK are confident to take their own lives into their hands and also feel responsible to help out others in need.

Empowerment strategies focus largely on building up people's self-confidence. The meetings at GK are also an outlet for complaints from all sorts for the workers, concerning pay, an electrical problem in their room or personal problems within the workshops. The women are often asked to talk about their personal problems, which suggests that GK is making an effort to reach the people and find out about their problems. Not everybody might react to this offer
of speaking out or complaining, but the possibilities are there.

The other idea behind this is to stimulate people into speaking up in front of a big group. Newcomers, for example, have to go through the ordeal of introducing themselves in front of everybody. In this respect men tend to be as intimidated as women. I remember how shy one man was when he stood up and walked to the front to introduce himself and how most women at the meeting started giggling. In that sense people at GK are expected to go through a learning and adaption phase from the very beginning.

Women react to and benefit from the meetings in different ways, depending, for example, on the time spent in GK, whether they live in the GK campus or outside and on their individual personalities and histories. Majilla, for example, came to GK with an enormous interest and curiosity to learn. She is someone who had already gone through a specific learning phase in her life before coming to GK. She was exposed to a different NGO in her village where she went to night-schools and had access to books and education. She also refers to having observed village life and situations where village women were oppressed by their husbands. She mentions other situations in her life that had an impact on her learning process. Coming to GK meant a continuation of this learning process, through the awareness-raising programme and meetings as well as Majilla's interaction with others.

I've known about these things mostly from here [GK]. Before also I understood that the way men treat women is not a good thing, but from here I've learned more about it. Then I had also read about these issues in a book I was given in that nightschool [of the other NGO] (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

Zohra speaks of having broadened her awareness in GK:

I used to think [about women’s issues] before too, but I never thought so much. It is like ... now ... gradually I’ve changed so much - I think about many things (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

These quotations illustrate my perception of GK as being a springboard for women, a place where women come with their own share of knowledge and experience, but where their thinking process and transformation process is stimulated, develops and reaches newer and at times more sophisticated levels
of thinking than before.

When compared to the village women with whom I spoke, the women at GK have, I believe, mostly developed a very high level of political awareness. They have a sophisticated knowledge of current national trends. For example, the recent increase in female labour market participation is associated with a wide range of circumstances. The GK women explain it in terms of the rise in female-headed households and increased outmigration of men. They speak of the instability of marriage and erosion of family networks and the tendency towards increased nuclearisation of families. They are conscious of the feminisation of certain work areas and labour market competition in other sectors. Women are aware of the current stagnant rural labour market resulting in unemployment or irregular employment for men (see Chapter Five). They are aware of the role women are now playing in challenging patriarchy. They are aware of how times have changed when comparing their own lives with their mothers' experiences.

When asked if she was not afraid of the villagers 'bad talking' (sanctions of the 'shomaj') that she goes out without a veil Selina replied:

I've done away with those kind of fears. I don't have those inhibitions any longer. When I first came to GK people made comments - 'she goes out to work, does this and that, she is not good'. Even now some of them make comments like 'those women who go out to work are not good girls', but you see what is different now is that in every house there is one or the other girl who goes out to work. Recently there have been many changes in the country (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

The women at GK are aware of people's changing attitudes towards working women and link this to various global trends. This suggests a quite remarkable understanding of the world beyond the immediate family/household context. For example, the reason for the changed atmosphere in the villages was explained by the increasing literacy rates, which were related to the impact of the NGOs.

Many people have known through those who have gone to the villages and opened up organisations that education is something valuable ... Many village girls have learned to read and write after that (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

One woman specifically mentions the urbanisation process she has been witnessing in recent years:
The whole atmosphere has changed. Before people were mainly uneducated. Now they are becoming educated and more industries and work places have come. Many women are working now. People are getting used to seeing women work ... My village was very rural, but now electricity is there, roads are there. It has changed completely. Before girls hardly used to go up to class six, but now we have a college in the village and many girls are studying (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

Another woman has won her family's and community's respect after applying her legal knowledge and awareness in practice. One of her cousins had tried to cheat her mother by claiming her land as his. By searching for the original land certificate she discovered and proved that the land was legally her mother's.

The GK women have learned to reflect on their experiences and the information given in GK and have developed a more abstract way of thinking as compared to some of the village women I spoke to. They also knew very well who Khaleda Zia was. Her name and her position as the country's president were so familiar to them that they would even include her in their daily conversations. I would therefore argue that GK women's political knowledge as well as ability to express their own political opinions was more evident than with women in the villages. For example recent government politics and Khaleda Zia were often associated with women's increased access to work.

Men are afraid [of women's increased participation in the labour market]. For this reason they say remove Khaleda. Industries are now taking women workers and dismissing men. Men's salary would be Tk 3000, but you can hire a woman for Tk 1200 for the same work, there is a good supply of women. The production rate of women and men is equal, so employers are interested to hire women (Rinu, now at jute-plastic firm in Dhaka, 24, married).

The government said that men and women have an equal right to work, but men don't want this ... Men can marry four times and as long as women had no jobs they had to stay at home, but now women are becoming clever (Kudera, shop owner, 48, married).

GK women were also capable of criticising the government.

They have passed laws to secure equal rights, but no-one shows us how to get this equality! (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

Some women want Khaleda Zia to stop violence against women in the domestic and public sphere (e.g. 'harassment when walking to work'). Others have concrete suggestions for the government, such as better working conditions (holidays,
salary, bonuses) and lower market prices, so that women can still maintain their families. The quotations below show what women would ask Khaleda if they had a chance to talk to her:

I would talk to her about us - the women ... We should get more opportunities for education and work (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

I'd talk about women's problems, about women's education and women's rights. There are so many problems in our country. There will be no development without proper education. I'll tell her that (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

I'd talk about us women, about how we can develop more. What more should I want from her (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).

6.3.3 Participation in the women's movement

GK's impact on women becomes apparent in the way they express their thoughts about equality, oppression and freedom. Their language has been influenced by 'feminist jargon' which they undoubtedly picked up in GK meetings, preparations for the women's marches and participation in the national women's movement. What comes across very clearly in the women's accounts is that they have not just 'picked up feminist jargon' and learned it by heart (as in my example of women learning the Quran by heart or Grameen Bank loanees being able to cite the 'sixteen decisions' on command). GK women know how to construct robust arguments on equal rights issues. They can articulate their thoughts very well and often react strongly to the topic.

Is only a man's life of value and not mine? (Zohra, printing press, 23, married)

I am a human being and a man is a human being, so if they get freedom why shouldn't we get it too! (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart.)

Whatever they do, we can do too, but wherever they go, we can't go (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).

Rahima goes beyond the argument of men and women having different mobilities and hints at social restrictions on women's use of their bodies in public spaces.
Men can work anywhere, but women can't. In our country men are free, but we women don't have their freedom ... Men can roam around freely on the streets. They can say what they want to. They can shit or piss on the streets, but women cannot do that (Rahima, carpenter, 35, separate).

Most GK women have discovered their capacities when working at GK and see themselves as equal to men. When asked whether they had ever wanted to be born a man, most of them reacted with a strong awareness of women's unequal treatment in society, but had come to terms with their identity as women.

One doesn't always feel like wanting to be a man, but when there are obstacles or when you feel disheartened you think of it ... anyway what difference is there between a man and a woman? I have gone through equal hardships (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

The average GK women thought it would have been useful to be a man in times when they suffered from unequal treatment and felt the disadvantage of being a woman personally, when they were facing difficulties because they were women. Now they no longer think like that as they feel equal to men.

GK women are well aware of the various ways cultural and patriarchal structures or hierarchies oppress women. This is not to say that other women, such as village women, are not aware of these constraints and therefore ignorant, but what strikes me in the GK women is their eloquence and passion when talking about equal rights. They are far more prepared to challenge dominant hierarchies in their thoughts and in some cases in their actions than the village women with whom I spoke. The quotations below illustrate GK women's heated discussions on equality with men, for example: a brother, a male colleague, my male translator (a stranger to them) or village elders.
Simeen enjoys discussing equality with male colleagues and her brothers at home.

I've asked many men about equality. About two to three months ago I also asked a man over here. It was while reaping paddy and he said 'you folks want equal rights, but you can't reap as much as we can.' I said 'sure I can' and eventually reaped the same amount as he did.

Question: Why do you debate this issue?

I've learned to. We discuss amongst ourselves why we should be given equal rights.

Question: Do you talk about it with your brothers?

Yes. I say to them 'why don't you give us equal rights', but they avoid answering.

Question: Why?

There isn't any answer, that's why.

Question: Why do they avoid the discussion?

They fear that they might lose the debate.

Question: Why do you want to discuss these issues?

It makes me feel good. Before women were not like this. Now they do equal amounts of work, so that's a great encouragement (Simeen, handicrafts, 20, unmarried).
Other GK women were confident enough to debate equality openly in their villages and feel they actually left an impact:

They listen to me much more than before. When I lived in the village I didn't know much. Now I work outside and they know that I am seeing many things and learning from that. So they listen to me ... I tell them about the problems of women ... When I go back to the village I discuss it freely [free bhabe] with both men and women and some people criticise me, but I don't give an ear to that [kan dia na] (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

If one woman earns money she feeds at least five family members, but men have many unnecessary expenses.

*Question: Did they [the villagers] agree with you?*

Yes, of course.

*Question: Did you say that to village men as well?*

I said it to men as well - I said to them 'see what women can do if they work, they will be so helpful to the family' ... They have seen my example. I've not given all my money to my in-laws. I've looked after my own family as well, my younger brothers and sisters. So people can see that women are more affiliated to their parents ... Sometimes I say if boys don't want to study then leave them. They can always get a job, but a girl cannot get a job so easily. So educate them. It will be wonderful for you in the future.

*Question: Do they understand you?*

Certainly they do, because they can see the facts (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, abandoned).
One of my male translators was amazed during an interview one day at the 
sharpness of a GK woman's reply to him: the unknown male stranger, who also 
represented a completely different class background.

Question: Do you discuss women's issues with other women?
I do and I go to meetings, I go to women's marches.

Question: Why do you go there?
Because men are oppressing women.

Question: You said you didn't do it [talk about women's issues] 
before GK, why after GK?
Because I didn't see these things before, I didn't hear of it.

Question: What is the main problem?
Because YOU [pointing at the male interpreter and raising her 
voice] are oppressing them, we want equal rights! (Hanufa, 
carpenter, 20, married)

My translator remained deeply impressed with Hanufa's bold behaviour and the 
way she had looked straight into his eyes while accusing him of being an 
oppressor. Her emotional outbreak indicated how strongly she felt about equality 
issues and that she had spent a lot of time reflecting on them.

A lot of GK women associated the organisation and the women's marches with 
equality. These are the places they perceived as 'places of equality', places where 
one talked about equality, where one saw equality, where equality was practised 
and lived.

Question: When did you start thinking about equality between men 
and women?
When joining GK and mixing with other people. We would 
gradually understand things. Let's say after about five years the 
picture started to become clear (Parvin, runs her own laundry 
service, 35, married).

Men and women are equal, though not in all places, but in cities ... 
in Dhaka ... I went on the women's day march. I saw there that 
men and women had become equal ... Outside GK women still 
cannot do the same jobs men do, but gradually the differences will 
be removed. It is obvious (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 
25, married).
Mahmuda was so inspired by the director of GK that she dreams of opening up her own women’s organisation:

I want to start a small organisation like GK ... and help everyone through it (Mahmuda, security post at GK, 24, unmarried).

Organisations like GK are important for providing a ‘fallback’ for women who have dropped out of social and kinship security networks.

I think about widows and abandoned women. Where can they go to? How can they and their children survive? Not everybody can get a job like me (Bina, construction worker, 30, married).

GK is so necessary. Where would they work if there was no organisation like this? (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

Most women at GK believe in change. They have discovered their own capacities. They have experienced change within themselves and now have clear visions for the future. They have witnessed equality in GK and they perceive the success of the women’s movement as an indicator of change. Apart from that they connect the International Woman’s Day with fun and joy and a feeling of ‘togetherness’

I liked it very much. It’s really a great thing. Everybody does something together ... enjoying themselves ... protesting against men ... isn’t that a great thing. Now you don’t hear that a girl has been killed by a boy. Previously many such incidents occurred. Things have improved a lot (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

We went there with so much enthusiasm ... It felt good, joyful, all going there together (Najma, laundry, 20, married).

Foslema also enjoys the marches describing how she voluntarily participates in them as well as in regular Naripokkho meetings in order to be informed about women’s situation in Bangladesh.

I felt good. Women couldn’t do anything before, but now they come outside of their homes and they are performing good work. I went there to listen [get information] about this (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

Various meanings were read into the marches. First of all they stood for a collective demonstration of equality between men and women. In the case of the GK women equality was understood through their own experience of having realised that they can work just as well as men. Bringing the women’s issue out into public through a very big and visible collective of women seemed significant
to the GK women - 'everybody can see us on the road'. The marches were also interpreted as a protest against male dominance and violence against women. Women went there to claim their equal rights and their 'freedom'. The women's movement was described by the majority of GK women as beneficial for themselves and for future generations.

I went there for women's liberation, for equal rights, to protest against women's oppression ... It has changed [for women]. They couldn't come out from their houses before, but now they can work freely (Kudera, shop owner, 48, married).

Men shouldn't beat or abandon women. If we go on these marches and it will not help my generation, at least it will help my daughter's. That's why we need it (Hanufa, carpenter, 20, married).

Women cannot move freely, they don't get their proper rights - to obtain those rights ... I go for those reasons. I go every year. I never miss it. I like going.

*Question: Is there a need for this movement?*

Of course there is, because without such an initiative things won't change. We are doing it for a better future (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

If women don't go through this process of participating in the women's movement, they never get freedom (Jamina, jute-plastic firm in Dhaka, 30, abandoned).

6.3.4 'Adda'¹²

'Pani ana bara shukh, dekha jai dosher mukh'. (Bengali proverb)

It is great to go and fetch water, because then you will meet lots of people.

'Adda' is an important part of Bangladeshi culture. With 'adda' one usually pictures a group of friends hanging out at a teastall in their leisure time drinking tea, smoking cigarettes and chatting. A teastall, however, is a public place and smoking cigarettes is seen as taboo for women in Bangladesh. The general image of 'adda' is therefore an 'adda' that takes place in male spaces. Female 'adda' spaces, on the other hand, are more the 'inbetween' areas. Above proverb, for example, describes 'adda' through the image of women in villages when fetching...
water from the river, where they meet other women to talk to for a while. This 'adda' is usually the highlight of their day. Much of female 'adda' therefore takes place parallel to working (e.g. while fetching water from the river, washing clothes at the river, sitting in the courtyard with other women stitching blankets).

At GK, where working and living spaces get blurred, 'adda' takes place at work, during lunch breaks and during leisure time. GK allows women space for talking to each other. As a matter of fact they tend to engage in very lively 'adda' rounds. Chatting and interacting with others, making friends and helping each other out was considered to be a significant part of their lives. The possibility of talking to others was crucial in establishing collective relationships and a basis for expressing solidarity with other women.

[W]e found people were commenting that, instead of going straight home after work, the women were staying behind to gossip (GK Report 1972:4).

The women at GK talk about anything that comes into their minds. They either chat about personal matters, their families, about work and daily GK situations or about experiences they have had and want to share with the others, such as overseas travel. In the shoemaking workshop they have even started discussing the possibility of opening up their own business.

We always talk about opening our own workshop outside. In fact each time we sit together we talk about it (Nasmun, shoe-maker, 22, married).

Besides private matters they also discuss more general issues. Debates at GK meetings are carried back to the smaller 'adda' rounds and talked over in a less intimidating space.

Well we talk about health and about the behaviour of husbands and other problems like that (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

Women bring their reflections to the discussion and relate what is said to their own histories and problems. Personal problems become a challenge for the group. They reflect on their own experiences or what they have seen or heard somewhere or what they have come across in the papers. Women who have been abandoned tell their stories - their own experiences of oppression. In that way
other women at GK have the chance to learn from their experiences. The kind of ‘adda’ women engage in at GK thus has an ‘educational’ element and encourages solidarity and a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of oppressive structures.

We learn about women’s problems because we see other women in GK and we talk to them and ask them why they came to GK (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

Question: Did you know about women’s problems before coming to GK or have you thought about it after coming here?

After coming to GK.

Question: Why didn’t you think before?

I didn’t understand the problems before. I never saw [these problems] so I didn’t think about them (Kudera, shop owner, 48, married).

They talk about their husbands, why they went for a second marriage or that their husband deserted them. I say I wouldn’t want to marry (Simeen, handicrafts, 20, unmarried).

We can learn something, because we discuss together (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).

At GK women exchange ideas, learn from each other, help each other out, console each other and give each other advice. Selina, for example, has a lot of experience at GK. She is often approached by younger women for her advice. Her influence on younger women is important as she advises them to resist possible oppressive situations at home.

When someone comes up with a problem I give my advice as best as I can ... I feel good about that, because everybody is fond of me. If someone shares a problem or secret with me I remain discrete about it, that’s why people trust me.

Question: Do you talk about women’s problems?

Certainly, when girls sit together they talk about all sorts of things. For instance this one girl. Her husband does not earn much money and is therefore thinking of going abroad. So I told her ‘if you let him go abroad, he will never come back to you’ (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).
The women at GK find comfort in sharing their problems with others. Sorrow gets shared. 'Adda' is thus consoling, a relief. It eases your mind in times of pain, when you feel down and sad.

Talking with others makes the sorrow go away and you feel better. (Kudera, shop owner, 48, married).

**Question:** Do these conversations help you?

I feel better. It helps because you can talk about different things ... you get consoled.

**Question:** Do you need these kind of women's groups?

Of course I need them. Can you go gaily without 'adda'? (Bina, construction worker, 30, married).

Having the opportunity to chat with friends breaks the feeling of isolation.

If you have friends to talk to you remain hearty. By living in isolation you get tense and worries will crowd the mind (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

Talking about problems with sincere friends makes the mind lighter. My mother wouldn't open her mouth in front of others. She lived so isolated (Simeen, handicrafts, 20, unmarried).

Some women reported that they do not have the same kind of friendships and relationships of trust, the same opportunities to be comforted when necessary back home in their villages. Establishing these kind of friendships in GK - making their own friends - is very significant, especially for young women, as they often have to leave their childhood friends behind once they get married and move to the husband's village. Within this new work environment women are making friends of their own, other than family-related 'friends' such as sister-in-laws or husband's friends. These new friends are women (and men) who share the same or similar work identities with them.

I have friends everywhere, only in my village I had fewer. Here at GK I have made most friends ... I used to have friends in my village, but they are all married now (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

I tend to visit my husband's house only for a short period. The family is good, but I see very little of the people there. I mix more with GK people (Nasmun, shoe-maker, 22, married).
For the village women I spoke with friendships with other women, where stories of oppression were exchanged and analysed, did not seem to take place in the same intensity as in GK. When asked with whom they shared their sorrow and discussed their problems the responses were, for example:

Well where would one go to talk about one’s sorrow. I stay at home. There are some neighbours. Besides, I don’t think much of discussing internal problems with external people. What is the use of that? (Shamsun, village woman, around 40, second wife).

I don’t have time [for that]. Anyway what should I talk about (Sahera).

Having said this, there were a few exceptional cases in GK, where certain women deliberately distanced themselves from the others.

I try to mix a bit with the people here, but not totally. My society won’t accept it ... My environment is different. It is my advantage, you know, my environment is ‘smart’, but if I was in that situation [of the other GK women] I would learn something here. I do not have anything to learn here, because my family is educated and cultured (Nurjahan, printing press, 20, married).

Coming from a very conservative area in Bangladesh and from a different class, having a husband, who earns a fair amount of money in the Middle East and therefore not having to work at GK for survival purposes i.e. having realistic alternatives are all possible reasons for Nurjahan not wanting to be associated with the average ‘poor’ GK woman.

In general, however, friendships at GK develop because people work so closely and intimately together. To have friends to chat with while working is enjoyable.

It felt very good at that time working with all the girls together in one place (Kudera, shop owner, 48, married).

Merjan has developed a feeling of belonging and togetherness while working at GK. She has made friends by getting to know the people at work.

I know the people here and we have become friends by working together ... We are all like family members here and I feel for them (Merjan, jute-plastic fabrication, 30, divorced).15

I myself experienced a special atmosphere in GK which differs from employment situations in general. It is about the way people work and live together, the way they relate to each other which, at times, has a soothing effect on you. Whenever I came back from a day trip to Dhaka I felt like coming back ‘home’. I felt at ease
and relaxed when I was back at GK. The minute I stepped through the gate I would enter a familiar world. You automatically bump into familiar faces at almost every corner. People greeted me as Tanja-‘apa’ (apa means sister) and the children ran after me and followed me to my room calling me Tanja-auntie. Somewhere on the way I would stop and have a little chat with somebody or would be invited for a cup of tea. It is an atmosphere where you can easily make friends. Women who have nowhere else to go, who have been abandoned or badly treated often equate GK with a family. What is the nature of this family atmosphere?

6.3.5 The Gonoshasthaya Kendra collective as a surrogate family

Roy (1986:86) speaks of an atmosphere of ‘fraternity and open communication’ in GK. Personally I find it inappropriate to speak of ‘fraternity’ in an organisation where the majority of its participants are women. So how would I describe GK?

To the outside observer who enters the GK premises for the first time the organisation comes across as an enormous self-sufficient independent commune. As mentioned in Chapter Four GK accommodates hostels for the unmarried workers and residential quarters for the married couples plus a school and day care centre for the workers’ children. It also houses meeting and dining halls, a television room, a hospital offering health and family planning services, a tea stall, a bank and the various manual and technical workshops that are scattered all over the place. Several of the vocational training workshops, for example the bakery, the shoe-making section and the laundry not only deliver their services to external customers, but often get their orders from GK itself or even individual GK workers. Working and living spaces are therefore blurred.

Children are a common sight at GK and move freely within these two spaces. GK provides a creche, where currently five women are employed as childminders. Female workers get time off for breastfeeding and the older children have the possibility to attend the GK school (which is also open for children of families not working at GK). In cases, where women have to leave GK temporarily to work
in Dhaka or in GK's regional subcentres, usually other women/families living in
GK take care of their children. Given the protected environment of the
organisation, GK employees do not have to worry about their children’s safety.
During the time I lived in GK I saw children playing and roaming around the
entire community, including the departmental workshops. Hence children are not
banned from work spaces at GK.
Plate 6.1
Women picking up their children from the day care centre after work
Particularly for those women, who live in the organisation, work and home, public and private spaces become intertwined. Work places are usually defined as public places. GK, however, although a work place is also a private place as it provides women shelter and protection. It appears as a more open space than the former village home, but its clear boundaries shield the GK community from the outside world. Those women, however, who have to commute to GK, the work place, are forced to leave their private spheres i.e. the village homes when entering public spaces through modes of travelling. GK as the destination of their daily travel appears as part of the outside world, but once enclosed inside its boundaries, GK the work place, turns into a safe haven for women through the atmosphere of collectivity it has created for its community.

The fact that men and women in GK work, sit, eat and live together in close proximity on a daily face-to-face basis shocks newcomers at first. Eventually, though, women get used to this peculiar and unfamiliar situation. Many of the GK women begin to appreciate it fairly soon. The initially unfamiliar and shocking GK environment turns into a 'family environment'. The image of a family atmosphere is reinforced by the fact that people in GK address each other as 'apa' and 'bhai' i.e. sister and brother. This also applies to the staff and the bosses with the exception of the director, who is referred to as 'borobhai', meaning big brother.\(^{16}\)

Communication between staff and employees is very close, even more so for those who also live in GK. Dolly, the woman in charge of Nari Kendra, for example, shares her room with other workers. GK has deliberately given people from the same background as the workers major responsibilities, which allows the workers to develop a strong personal and usually trusting relation with their immediate superiors.

*Question: When you face any problems who do you talk to?*

With my director.

*Question: And on personal matters?*

Whoever understands emotions. Someone who understands me. I go to Dolly-‘apa’ (Kaleda, bakery, 24, married).
Majilla, who is now working at the export processing zone and often suffering from verbal abuse, remembers the female bosses at GK.

They are good. Women are good. They have sympathy for other women ... It would be better [to have female bosses at the export processing zone]. If it is a woman she would sometimes say something sweet and sometimes she would also punish, but it would be better, because here these people are always so rude. If it is a woman she would help me, but not those men. There they don't care about people's health. Look at me. I used to be so healthy. See what has become of me. They only want work (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

Living in a 'family atmosphere' plays an important part in fostering friendships and mutual support networks amongst women. Shongita, who is now working at UNICEF, is missing her friends and the family atmosphere at GK. The quotations below demonstrates that other employers do not have the 'family atmosphere' GK provides.

In GK we were all like equals. You may talk to anyone at any time. When you feel unhappy you can find someone to talk to, but here (UNICEF) it is not like that - mind your duty - your boss is just your boss - It is out of question to chat to a boss. In GK if one looks gloomy others come forward to enquire about the reason, ask what is wrong, ask if one's mother is sick. People try to console each other. They speak kindly to each other and you can always have a good chit chat. It is not like that over here (at UNICEF). This is something I really miss. That is why I come running here (GK) each Saturday.

Razia, who lives in a village close to GK, is a widow whose children are now grown up. She has been working at GK for a long time and has developed a feeling of belonging. Her attitude to GK has changed over the years. In her case it goes as far as feeling bored if she is at home and not at work. GK and the friendships she has developed over the years have become a surrogate for her family.

Now I can't sit back at home because I get bored with that. Before when I had to come to work and leave my children at home it felt really bad, but now I can't stay at home ... As I told you, if I stay home for a whole day I get bored because there is no one to chat with. You see I am a lonely person so I need to chat to someone all the more (Razia, welder, 40, widow).
GK's overall philosophy is geared towards building up a collective, hence the stress on the 'togetherness' factor. Institutions such as the family, kin and the 'para' are replaced by a new institution, where emphasis is placed on relationships between non-relatives. GK can almost be pictured as a new 'home' away from the old 'home'. This new home can give women a feeling of liberation from old bonds and old oppressive lifestyles; a feeling of belonging; a feeling of loyalty to the new home; and a sense of solidarity with the new family members.

No other company has given so much priority to women's employment and we have worked hard over here. So we stay on in GK because of a kind of inner attachment (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

GK as a new home has the capacity to free most women from unwanted cultural and patriarchal constraints. On the other hand GK as a home has boundaries just like any other home. The physical and emotional space it offers its members is bigger than the 'four walls' of a village house or the 'para', in which the village 'shoma' allows women to move. Nevertheless it is not free of its own rules and its own system of surveillance. GK can only function if its workers abide by its rules. As already mentioned in Chapter Four workers, staff and doctors are supposed to eat all together at the Gonomess. People are expected to participate at the weekly and monthly meetings and official functions. Women have to be flexible enough to accept being sent to carry out emergency relief work whenever the need arises. Hence, home spaces get invaded by work spaces. The trainees are expected not to become pregnant during their initial two-year training period. If workers want to inter-marry (i.e. a male GK worker marrying a female GK worker) the authorities have to be informed. During working hours women are not supposed to wear make-up and lipstick and it is strictly forbidden to smoke anywhere in GK. The campus is surrounded by a wall, such that to enter or leave GK one has to pass the gate-keepers, who ask visitors to reveal their identity. This means that women can feel safe and respected in GK - as Mimosa says 'women get a lot of honour here' - but they are also subject to a strict security and surveillance system. At night the gates are closed, the doors of the women's hostels are locked and three or four security guards make their rounds. To a certain extent one could almost describe GK as 'purdah safe' as women's honour seems well protected. Even GK becomes a 'closed space' in the sense of keeping
its family members within boundaries, with gates and gate-keepers and security guards who watch over the security and sexual propriety of this little community.

On the one hand, then, GK follows its own rules, just as village communities do, and encloses its community within controlled boundaries. Does this make GK an organisational patriarch where the rule of the father is being reproduced by that of the organisation? GK seems to differ from patriarchal village structures, however, in its attempt to create a collective within the community. There is no doubt about GK’s top management ranks being structured in a fairly hierarchical way as in most other NGOs in Bangladesh. The GK community itself, however, is not split into hierarchical social units as in Kotalova’s (1996) case study villages, where the community comprises a collection of separate families and where female family members are restricted to the respective ‘paras’. GK’s idea is not a collection of single family units that live next to each other, but rather a collective that disrupts classical family structures. When GK women speak of GK’s family atmosphere they refer to it as the entire collective being one big family. They work as a collective, they reap the paddy as a collective, they eat together in the Gnomess as a collective. It is this feeling of ‘togetherness’, of being a big group, where people interrelate to each other on a daily basis that GK is trying to create.

6.4 Conclusion

The beginning of this chapter described the women’s journey from their homes to the new workplace GK. In this journey they have distanced themselves from their former lives to a certain extent. ‘Traditional village life’ was associated by the GK women with isolation, illiteracy, ignorance, restrictions and surveillance. In their striving for upward mobility, however, they make such a strong distinction between their past village lifestyle and the ‘educated society’ they claim to have found beyond the village boundaries that they have carved out an entirely different identity for themselves. In this process of identification with the ‘bhodrolok’, the ‘urbanite, educated’ gentlefolks, the GK women tend to differentiate themselves from the ‘traditional village women’ by depicting them as ignorant, shy, timid, dependant, helpless, fatalistic and incapable of hard
The chapter then moves on to explore what women have experienced and learned since leaving their original homes and village lifestyle behind. It describes how women have gained new roles in their families and communities through their access to information and education at GK. Furthermore their participation in GK meetings and the women's movement has awakened their class and gender consciousness. Compared to the village women I spoke with women at GK seem to have gained a more sophisticated level of political awareness and also seem more prepared to challenge cultural and patriarchal constraints. They no longer identify themselves as 'illiterate village women', but claim their rights to education and work. They criticise government politics, patriarchal practices (e.g. dowry, wife-beating) and existing ideologies. They are also confident to enter debates on equality with non-kin males. The majority of women at GK identify with the women's cause, which was stimulated and/or strengthened at GK. The learning experience and new collective relationships women have established at GK have led to an increased feeling of solidarity and compassion for the poor and other oppressed groups. Solidarity exists amongst the people living and working at GK, it exists in crisis areas like Cox's Bazaar and it is strongly felt for destitute women in need of a 'fallback' position such as GK offers.

Notes

1. Religious instruction consists of learning the four kalemases (main precepts of Islam), sooras (Quranic verses) and being able to recite the Quran, which is in Arabic (Mizan 1994:42).

2. Khaleda Zia was the country's president at that time.

3. 'Bhodrolok' are refined, cultured, well-educated people. In this context bhodrolok also refers to town-people. Rural people are usually defined by their occupation which is often a family tradition e.g. farmers or fishermen or craftsmen. Therefore it is easier to classify villagers. However, in towns nobody knows what people do, so town-people are just referred to as the 'bhodrolok' i.e. the gentlefolks. Village and urban language and lifestyles are quite different, so China is referring to learning an urbanite, educated and more refined type of behaviour.


5. The difference between the government's and GK's approach towards raising family planning awareness is that the government's campaign is on a broader general level (posters, media etc), whereas GK deals with the issue on a more personal level. Paramedics, who come from a village background themselves, are trained in GK and then sent to the villages
spreading their knowledge on a door-to-door basis.

6. Linguistic note: A man actively marries a woman, but a woman passively gets married to a man i.e. is married into another family.

7. Fasting during a specific period.

8. Bengali colloquial expression: for women it means preserving the values of chastity, modesty, fidelity, whereas for men it means maintaining family honour.


10. A condition for membership at Grameen Bank is the ability to memorise the Bank's sixteen commandments (e.g. 'we shall not live in dilapidated houses', 'we shall grow vegetables all year', 'we shall plan to keep our families small' etc.). 'Potential members are tested by a bank worker, who calls out the numbers of the various decisions and makes the woman recite them' (Hashemi and Schuler 1994:66).

11. Naripokkho (Pro-Women) is an advocacy organisation based in Dhaka. Naripokkho meetings are announced in GK and those who are interested in attending are taken there with a GK vehicle.

12. See in this context Akhtar (nd), who in her book describes the nature of 'adda' and the weekly 'adda' sessions held at the feminist bookstore Narigrantha Prabartana in Dhaka.


14. See also Kabeer (1994, 1995a) on social isolation of married women due to patrilocal and patrilineal marriage systems and the significance of 'extra-household forms of cooperation and solidarity' for improving women's 'fall-back positions' in the household.

15. She actually uses 'chinporichit, millmohabbof which has a stronger meaning than simply friendship. It means that people develop love and affection for each other, because they have spent a lot of time together.

16. In her comparative study of NGOs and governmental credit organisations Goetz (personal communication, 1995) observed a similar attitude among staff in other NGOs such as BRAC, whereas in government programmes the bosses would always be referred to as 'Sir'. In her study of female garment workers Kabeer (1991) notices the 'creation of fictive kinship' in the factories. Here a family atmosphere between male and female workers is created in order to 'de-sexualise' the workplace. This point surely plays a significant role in GK as well, but the 'family environment' to which women at GK refer seems to go beyond mere protection of women's reputation.
Chapter Seven: Embodied dimensions of empowerment

7.1 Introduction

Research on South Asian women’s bodies and attempts to understand what empowerment might mean for their bodies and behaviour seems to be lacking in feminist literature. Most of the existing feminist literature on empowerment in the South Asian context refers to empowerment in terms of economic and/or socio-political empowerment (Batliwala 1993, Carr et al. 1996, Creevey 1996, Holcombe 1995, Kabeer 1994, 1995a, Mizan 1994, Todd 1996). In the previous two chapters I examined both women’s economic and socio-political changes. Empowerment, however, is not limited to economic, social and political factors. It also has close interconnections with the body. Empowerment is a lived and embodied experience.

In the context of Bangladesh, where cultural norms of appropriate behaviour have restricted women’s bodily movements to a certain extent, women’s bodies can become new important sites of resistance. However, to date, the ‘body’ in work on women in Bangladesh tends to be tagged onto specific strands in development literature rather than meriting a discussion of its own. In the ‘status and purdah’ literature, for example, the female body was discussed only in terms of a ‘hidden body’. The ‘integrationist’ literature countered this image by stressing the need for a ‘visible body’, a body that becomes ‘unveiled’ through women’s increased mobility and access to work. During the WID period women’s bodies were only relevant in the context of population policies: research on fertility, family planning and health issues perceived the body as a ‘reproductive body’. Notions of a ‘victimised body’ seem to appear in the more recent literature on ‘women and violence’.

The body has no particular place in the empowerment literature nor is it part of the NGO strategies. The Grameen Bank is perhaps an exception. Besides having to memorise the ‘sixteen decisions’ members have to

... salute, chant Grameen Bank slogans, and do physical drills. During meetings, the women have to sit in straight rows of five to mark their group affiliation ... (Hashemi and Schuler 1994:66).
Grameen Bank’s stress on women’s physical discipline is explained in terms of a ‘culture of poverty’

... expressed in the bent back, the fallen glance, and the low inaudible voice ... Grameen recognises that people's dignity grows out of a straight back. The Bank workers [therefore] attach great importance to people at centre meetings looking at them directly as they talk, standing straight, and speaking loudly and clearly (cited in Kabeer 1994:248).

The way this strategy approaches women’s bodies, however, is rather militaristic. According to Kabeer women’s ‘freedom of body movement’ has not evolved ‘from below’. She refers to the strategy as a

‘male’ model of empowerment in that it is masculine deportment and movement that are held up as the standard to emulate (Kabeer 1994:248).

GK’s strategy towards women’s empowerment focuses on their engagement in so-called men’s work, again an approach that has been criticised by feminists as a ‘male’ model of empowerment (Eisenstein 1984, Goetz 1997, Yasmin 1997). My interest, however, lies in examining the (direct or indirect) influence such an approach might have on women’s bodies and whether or not such an approach can eventually lead to women’s embodied empowerment. In this chapter I therefore investigate whether women feel comfortable in the way they use, move and interact with their bodies at GK. GK does not specifically address women’s relation to their bodies when offering training in non-traditional employment areas. GK’s general concern with women’s bodies - being primarily a health organisation - is in relation to their health and fertility. The idea behind non-traditional work on the other hand stems much more from the wish to dismantle cultural notions of women’s capabilities and their gendered roles in a given society. My analysis of women’s involvement in non-traditional work at GK will explore the ways women’s bodies react to such work.
7.2 Behavioural codes for Bangladeshi women's bodies

This section examines behavioural codes for the female body in Bangladesh and women's controlled sexuality. In a detailed ethnographic study of a Bangladeshi village, Rozario (1992) discusses women’s status in the context of purdah and notions of shame and honour. Behavioural codes for women, she argues, are aimed at controlling female sexuality.

A woman’s ‘misbehaviour’ does not have to involve sex directly, as an impression of her sexual status is often formed from her day-to-day behaviour - how she walks, dresses, handles her hair, as well as how she behaves with her family [and] neighbours ... (Rozario 1992:85).

Constraining women’s sexuality has strong repercussions for their mobility, dress and voice. Strict purdah, the idealised behaviour for women, therefore implies the silencing of their voices, restrictions to their movements in public spaces and the desexualisation of their bodies through veiling.

The significance of the veiling of women is that on entering the men's world they are made non-persons and thus are unapproachable (Rozario 1992:88).

The status of ‘non-person’ thus prevents women from approaching and being approached by strangers. When visiting my father's relatives, who live in a village in Noakhali, I often witnessed the practice of purdah by my aunts and cousins. Whenever a non-family related man entered the house, all the married women who lived there or had come over for a visit rushed off, disappearing into more private rooms. As soon as the ‘stranger’ (who was in reality a familiar face from the village) left, the women would all come back out from their hiding places.

Some Muslim scholars find that women’s seclusion does not match Mohammed's reformist ideas and life style, not forgetting the active political life his wives led. Orthodox Muslims, however, justify women's seclusion on the grounds of men’s difficulty in controlling their desires. The veil is therefore seen as protection for men from the temptations of women viewed as sexual animals (Mernissi 1975:4 referring to Kacem Amin). Arens and van Beurden (1977:37) came to similar conclusions:
... when reading the Quran ... [w]e also wondered sometimes whether women really are such erotic creatures that they are continually giving trouble to men, as was often stated. We got the feeling that men are also troubled by their own sexual desires and, therefore, had to protect themselves from this by veiling women and restricting them in their movements and behaviour.

Women's controlled sexuality is not confined to Islam or Islamic countries alone, however. Sharma (1980), for example, refers to similar control of women's sexuality in the West arguing that purdah, if defined broadly,

... is a universal phenomenon in which women of the east are situated at the stronger extreme and western women at the weaker end ... (Sharma 1980 cited in Ahmed and Naher 1987:54).

Mandelbaum (1988:101) cites Whitehead and Ortner's (1981) reference to the 'universality in all hierarchical societies' of 'guarding a daughter's virginity'.

In the village, which she studied, Rozario (1992) observed how the interdependencies of class, communal power relations and religion affect gender socialisation. She argues that female sexuality was controlled in all three communities - Hindu, Muslim and Christian - with the differences lying mainly in the mechanisms of control. Similarly, Muslim feminists such as Mernissi (1975) and El Saadawi (1980) argue that both Western and Islamic cultures control women's sexuality, but that they have contrasting notions of female sexuality. According to these authors Western societies understand female sexuality as passive, whereas Islamic countries perceive female sexuality as active.

The orthodox Islamic image of women, therefore, appears contradictory in that it regards women in general as passive, weak, vulnerable and dependent on male protection, but still strong enough 'in the disruptive potential of their inherent sexual magnetism' (Mandelbaum 1988:105). In Islam, behaviour codes for both men and women, but in particular for women's sexual behaviour, are closely linked to notions of honour and shame. Honour mainly relates to men and is actively achieved, whereas shame relates to women and is passively defended, which results in different expectations of behaviour for men and women (Rozario 1992). Since women are seen as purely sexual 'creatures',

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... [faithfulness and virtue are therefore not natural for omnisexual women; in the light of such a portrayal men needed to immobilise women, lock them up, hide them and separate them from unrelated males (Mandelbaum 1988:91).

According to Sabbah (1984 cited in Rozario 1992:90) 'silence, immobility and obedience' are seen as the 'key criteria of female beauty' in Islamic societies. From an early age girls are socialised into preserving their sexual purity and having lāgga-shāram (shame, embarrassment). The following quotation illustrates how the concept of 'shame' was explained to Gardener by the village women with whom she lived during a fifteen month stay in Bangladesh:

[Shame] is what you feel when a strange man catches sight of you; it is what you feel if your marriage is mentioned; it is the reason for covering your head, and not letting your sari rise above your heels; it is why you hide behind your mosquito net if male guests arrive ... (in Gardener 1991:45).

The behavioural codes described above influence the way women are socialised into denying their own bodies and identities. The ideal behaviour for Bengali Muslim women entails hidden bodies and low voices. My observations of women at GK seem to suggest that many of the women there have started changing their relation to their own bodies. They are challenging stereotyped images of women's bodies as objects of either purity or shame, pleasure or honour (Adnan 1989, Rozario 1992). Instead women are accepting their bodies, using them in a more conscious way and confidently presenting their newly discovered bodies in public spaces.

7.3 Bodily practices of empowerment

In this section I examine external and internal factors influencing women's new relation to their bodies. They can be either external and pragmatic such as those influences relating to the type of work required at GK or internal reflecting more on the woman's experience of discovering a sense of self. I shall discuss how women's bodies react to these internal and external factors. I shall also explain how an outside observer views these changes: in other words, how the women use their newly-discovered bodies in new spaces and situations and in interaction with people.
7.3.1 Raising voices

She will not raise her voice or laugh loud as these are deemed immodest behaviour (Ahmed and Naher 1987:56).

In GK, women's supposedly 'masculinised' behaviour and bodily attitude eventually leads to the contestation of socially-ascribed norms of behaviour for women. 'Raising their voices' and 'laughing loudly' without feeling ashamed is one example. The quotation below demonstrates women's resistance to gender socialisation. Many women at GK were aware of cultural constraints on their behaviour, often reinforced by their parents' teachings:

When I was at home I thought whatever my parents say is right: you have to wear a veil to go out, if you do this or that people will think badly of you, speaking loudly is bad and so on. So I used to think these were the right things. I learned whatever my parents taught me. Now I say to myself no! Now I realise that there are many things to learn in this world (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

One thing women at GK have learned is how to use their voices. Any outside observer who enters the gates of GK will soon notice that the majority of the women there do not meet the ideal of 'silent' women. During an interview, a member of the women's organisation Naripokkho recalled her first impression of the women at GK. She thought the women there must have undergone some sort of operation because they were shouting and speaking so loudly, something she had not experienced before.

Obviously the type of work many women perform at GK requires a loud voice, because there is constant noise in the background, be it the sound of rattling print machines, running engines, electric saws or drills. In order to communicate with the other workers, male as well as female, one is bound to shout most of the time. Women have to use and raise their voices in order to perform their work efficiently. They react to an external influence.

Some women, like Shongita, however, also tend to shout even when this is not needed in order to perform work efficiently. Shongita shouts also in private. She simply feels confident and comfortable about shouting at men or women or whoever annoys her. Her transformed body has an impact on how she relates to others. She feels confident about making her point and has the courage to
demand to be listened to. For example, during our interview, which took place in the canteen, she got so angry with some men chatting there that she shouted at them saying ‘shut up, can’t you see that Tanja-apa (Tanja-sister) is trying to do her work?’

I did not have the chance to witness women’s raised voices within their homes or communities, but I did hear women shouting outside the GK boundaries on occasions such as the marches for International Women’s Day. Here I am speaking of women raising their voices as a group in a public situation. Even in very conservative areas of Bangladesh such as Cox’s Bazaar the GK women were shouting. It was the first time GK had organised a women’s march there. The actual march was preceded by a meeting, which several resident women from Cox’s Bazaar attended. (During the meeting most of these women were unveiled. As soon as they came out of the meeting, however, they veiled themselves again and went back home. Only a few of them decided to participate in the march.) The group was therefore rather small, consisting mainly of GK women and a handful of resident women (see Plates below). The shouting was not as loud as in the marches in Dhaka, but no less impressive. On the contrary, as it took place in one of the bastions of fundamentalism the atmosphere during the march was far more loaded than in Dhaka. I myself felt a mixture of emotions ranging from fear to pride and defiance when passing the town’s mosque, which was full at that moment.
Plates 7.1 and 7.2
Women from Cox's Bazaar after attending the GK meeting
Plates 7.3 and 7.4 GK women preparing for the march in Cox's Bazaar
Obviously the women participating in the marches did not decide to shout out in a spontaneous fashion: they are organised by NGOs like GK and (in Dhaka) form part of a huge procession of women. GK prepares the women for an occasion like this and a certain atmosphere and excitement is built up days before the actual event. Women shout in public partly because they are expected to do so by the organisation and partly because everybody else is doing so. In Dhaka, where the group is enormous, the women feel strong and become emotionally charged. The women also shout because they can relate to the idea behind the marches, because many of them in one way or the other feel the need to express their own situation. Shouting within the protection of a big group rather than having to relate to someone on a face-to-face basis is easier and more comfortable than when you are on your own - say inside your home, in front of your family or with a community or union leader. Zohra, for example, when asked what she felt that day explains:

I really feel great - we go in groups and shout out slogans (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

The women enjoy participating in the women's marches. The International Women's Day has become a special event in their lives. GK starts early at five am gathering everybody in four to five buses hired for the day. These bus loads full of women then head towards the capital. When I sat in one of these buses the atmosphere was overwhelming. All the women inside the bus started chanting march songs loudly with the windows wide open so that people outside could hear them clearly. This continued in Dhaka, where groups of women from other NGOs gathered into one big march: thousands of women shouting out slogans for equal rights. The march ends in a large park, where people have a rest and begin to relax. This is when the Women's Day Programme starts: music is played, speeches are given and plays are performed on a big stage. The plays are usually in 'street theatre' style and, because of their simplicity, but strong symbolic meanings, they are always a success with the audience. The performance I saw, for example, described the social control of women's bodies. It showed a scene where two girls were laughing and dancing around, when suddenly a deep dark male voice interrupted their merriment by scolding them. The girls' behaviour changed instantly: They became silent, turned their faces away from the audience and moved in a very reserved fashion. The women in the audience enjoyed these plays immensely and reacted to them. They understood
the messages, reflected on them and laughed out loud whenever a scene was particularly funny. The idea behind the Woman's Day Programme is to make everyone enjoy that day, feel comfortable and have fun, but reach people's awareness at the same time by conveying messages such as the one on the body. Some of the popular slogans used for the Women's Day either in posters or as chants were, for example:

_Amar shorir, amar shidanto._
My body, my choice.

_Nari, nari, nari shobi korte pari._
Women, women, women we can do everything.

Plates 7.5 - 7-8 show women contesting ideal images of Bangladeshi womanhood.
Plates 7.5 and 7.6 GK women preparing for the march in Dhaka
Plates 7.7 and 7.8 Women during the march and in the park
Besides having learned how to ‘raise their voices’ most GK women also lost their inhibitions about laughing and making jokes in public. They feel comfortable displaying emotions and feelings women are usually supposed to control. As illustrated above, ‘laughing loudly’ in public is generally interpreted as indecent behaviour for a woman in Bangladesh. The husband of one GK woman, for example, gave me the following response when I asked him what he thought about the fact that his wife now had so many friends in GK.

*Question: Do you like it?*

I don't mind that much.

*Question: OK, you don't have any objections, but do you like it?*

Yes, I like it, but sometimes I give her advice ‘you can mix with people, but there should be a certain limit. You should be careful with your behaviour like not laughing too loud in front of people’.

*Question: What do you mean by ‘behaviour’?*

Sometimes some friends are around. [Pause] When she starts gossiping with them she sometimes forgets that people might be passing by. Maybe older people might pass.

*Question: What do you mean?*

The important thing is that people shouldn’t start saying anything bad about her (Zohra’s husband).

This demonstrates that from the point of view of the husband his wife is transgressing a boundary between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour by ‘laughing too loud’ in public. This behaviour, he fears, will provoke criticism from other people. He seems to be concerned with the family honour and therefore thinks he has to give his wife instructions on appropriate behaviour. His wife on the other hand seems to have no inhibitions about laughing loudly in front of other people. She has overcome internalised behavioral codes. Now she interprets ‘laughing loudly’ and enjoying herself in the company of her friends as a perfectly normal way of behaving for which she does not have to feel ‘shame’ (*laggasharam*).

I observed this relaxed kind of behaviour with most of the women I encountered when living in GK. When transcribing my tapes I was reminded on the one hand of the general noise in GK, which often made interviewing very difficult, but on
the other hand I was rewarded when listening to the women's lively and gay voices and sudden outbursts of laughter. Some of them would even tease me, asking me for example if I would take them along in my suitcase when I went back home. Once I asked Razia, a widow, whether she ever considered remarriage. Apparently this question must have been so stupid to her that she just laughed at me and bluntly asked me if I was crazy! On other occasions women were teasing and laughing at me when we ate together in the dining hall and I was making a fool of myself trying to eat fish with one hand. I believe that the women behave in such a relaxed fashion within GK because of the organisation's 'family' environment. Seeing other women behave in a relaxed way gives newcomers the reassurance that they can behave in a similar way. Nobody makes them feel ashamed for doing what they are doing, for being who they are. On the contrary, many women feel accepted in GK:

In GK women get a lot of respect (Mimosa, jute-plastic worker, 24, abandoned).

7.3.2 Communicating with non-relatives

The previous section examined the extent to which women have experimented with the level of their voices and started to 'shout'. In this section I take the argument further by analysing how women use their newly-found voices to communicate with other people and be more articulate than before. Here I am not talking about raising the voice per se, in order to be heard, but raising the voice in order to articulate on a face-to-face basis a woman's demands and wishes: negotiating her interests in a more sophisticated form of communication. Living and working in the collective leads to a situation in which women are bound to communicate with others, be it other women, male colleagues, bosses, people from a different religious background or strangers like me.

Question: Was your wife shy before she came to GK?

That shyness has gone while she was in GK. Naturally they would talk a bit more there. The bosses and supervisors are there, it is natural that they have to talk with them ... If you go somewhere then you are kind of bound to talk twice as much as normal (Majilla's husband).
The GK experience had an impact on women’s behaviour towards other people.

I never spoke to so many people before. You see, I move about in a factory atmosphere now. I speak about so many kind of things with so many different people. I have changed in many ways [self-satisfied laughter] ... Although I haven't had much education, I do know how to handle people now, I know how to talk to them. But before, if I spoke up they'd say: 'she doesn't know how to talk' (Mimosa, jute-plastic worker, 24, abandoned).

Mimosa is describing the organisation as the place where social relations take place. Like Mimosa, many women feel they have not had such an opportunity before. They speak of not having had that kind of interaction with other people or not as much communication with so many different types of people.

Previously I never talked to other people - only my parents, my uncle and grandparents - I only talked to them ... I felt scared to talk to others (Mimosa).

The women I talked to seem to have lived a more isolated life before leaving their homes and coming to GK and therefore often did not have the courage to talk to unknown people. They were also socialised into accepting certain behaviour patterns like not communicating with strangers, and hence also not being recognised or listened to by others. Since they did not have that many chances to 'practice' communication with others it is not surprising that others would not regard them as someone who 'knows how to talk'. Mimosa has overcome this kind of internalised oppression and is resisting cultural norms of idealised behaviour for women by speaking to strangers now. Women like Mimosa link their newly-won communication skills to the work place as it is a new environment that requires adaptation and communication. GK is described by Mimosa as a work place, a 'factory like' place, the place where she 'moves around' a lot. She is moving about and interacting with many other people. But GK is more than a mere work place, where you are bound to bump into other people and say something to each other. What many women describe is the fact that they have learned how to communicate with other people in GK. In other words, GK is offering them a new opportunity to develop social relations. This affects the relationship towards themselves, their bodies and others.

The accounts indicate that the majority of women at GK have overcome their shyness when speaking to men. Hashemi, a sociologist and member of Grameen Trust, believes that women in rural Bangladesh 'hide' from men not only because
of the *purdah* factor, but because they are not used to men’s company and therefore do not know how to handle interaction with men. He further argues that increased interaction with men will have an impact on how women relate to their husbands and other male family members. My interviews suggest that GK women have changed their behaviour not only towards their husbands or male family members, but towards men in general. Nowadays many GK women are not so easily intimidated by men, be it their husbands, other male family members, male colleagues, GK bosses, strangers, men from different classes or educational backgrounds, village elders or religious leaders.

Rahima, who had left her husband when he took a second wife, is convinced that now she would be able to stand up to him:

> Now it is also possible to defy husbands. I did not have much knowledge [of how to protest] before; so my husband took a second wife, but now I wouldn’t let him do that (Rahima, carpentry, 35, abandoned).

Shongita was abandoned by her husband when she was fifteen and pregnant due to unmet dowry demands. Now that she is financially solvent he wants her back. She is even considering getting back together with him for the daughter’s sake, but not in the role of an ‘obedient’ wife:

> He wants to come here all the time, but I don’t let him.

*Question: Do you ever feel that he wants you back, because you now earn money.*

> Well ... I don’t know. My brother says to him ‘My sister has put on flesh so now you come to her.’ But I don’t think this is true. I don’t give him a penny - and he wouldn’t have the courage to ask for any money either (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, 30, abandoned).

Selina not only refers to having changed her behaviour towards men: she has also stopped fearing ‘educated people’:

> In my husband’s house I had nothing to say. When male guests would come I would have to sit in a corner, because I wasn’t supposed to talk to them ... Now my eyes are open. I know so many things. I know about the world and I can understand what is good or bad. Now I can also fight and shout with an educated man (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).
She has overcome the feeling of being intimidated by men as well as people she formerly classified as belonging to a 'higher' class, the 'urban', 'educated' class. I would argue on similar grounds to Hashemi when referring to women not being used to interacting with men, that the GK women lost their inhibitions about 'other people' - in this case the dominant classes, the 'big educated' people - once they got used to communicating with these others.

There are, however, exceptions like Rinu, who are still struggling with different values. She finds herself in a situation where old internalised values (what her mother taught her) compete with her newly found sense of independence.

How can I think my husband is not superior to me? ... My mother taught me to always keep the husband in honour and respect him. She told me even if times are changing I should still keep the old values, especially about the husband (Rinu, jute-plastic worker in a firm in Dhaka, 24, married).

7.3.3 Crossing the boundaries of village language

[W]omen use a different language than men, perhaps reflecting their limited world view imposed by the double isolation of their lives. Never taught to think conceptually or analytically, the women often do not understand the reasons for or meaning of questions (Tinker in Islam 1982:xiv).

My experiences when interviewing the GK women were opposite to Tinker's: almost every woman with whom I spoke responded to my questions (including fairly abstract ones) without hesitation. However, the few husbands with whom I spoke would react far more slowly to my questions and would often not be able to conceptualise these. As far as the village women were concerned it depended on the individual. Some had difficulties in answering certain questions and reacted with silence and discomfort; others did not understand the questions, but were confident in the way they dealt with this situation, saying: 'Sister, don't ask me these kind of questions, because I don't know about that'.6 The GK women, however, spoke differently from the village women. They spoke in a clear and loud voice. Their body language towards me was open and relaxed. They used complete sentences and during the interview the conversation usually remained fluid, which was less the case with the village women. The village women did not maintain a fluid conversation. They appeared more distracted and fidgety. They
often stopped in the middle of a sentence, became blocked and needed a fair amount of prompting during the interview. The language itself was also different between the village and GK women. The latter possessed a more expanded vocabulary. In their conversations they would use newly acquired and more sophisticated words. They were also familiar with certain English words and built these into their conversations.

Tinker argues that women use a different language from men due to their isolation. I believe one has to extend this argument: both men and women, who live in villages and have fewer opportunities to interact with others, use a different language from those who are exposed to a world beyond the village. In the case of the GK women certain external mechanisms have helped them in their process of learning how to represent their interests. These mechanisms or personal experiences at GK have helped them feel more comfortable in the way they express themselves and in the way they articulate their ideas. Women’s exposure to other people from different backgrounds in GK has helped them overcome feelings of insecurity and inferiority. Their identity as ‘illiterate village women’ who might previously not have known how to talk to me and who might have felt uncomfortable and uneasy in talking to me had vanished and new identities were being accommodated. The women have no fear of talking to ‘educated’ people because they have learned to speak like them (see Chapter Six).

In the village the lifestyle is different. Here is an educated environment [shikit poribesh] and I pretend to be educated also in my behaviour. I act like them and talk like them [bhodro bhasha i.e. the language of the bhodrolok] and that is how I am learning (Najma, laundry, 20, married).

Najma says she has learned a different way of speaking. I have already demonstrated how women had discovered their own voices and were no longer using them in suppressed whispers, but loudly and confidently. Here I am referring to women crossing the boundaries of village language and speaking like the bhodrolok, the 'cultured, educated, urbanite gentlefolks'. They have learned how to verbalise their needs and interests towards dominating groups. This is not only about feeling confident about talking, but also confidence in what they are saying, how they say it and to whom they say it. Having found their own voices and the ability to use them, they can now use their voices to express their needs instead of having someone else talk and decide on their behalf.
Before I had no idea about men. I didn't know how to talk with somebody, although I was educated. I used to go to school and then immediately back home. Now I can talk with everybody, even big educated people. Before I could not have talked with you so closely. Now I can ... Now I am not shy anymore. Now I can also talk to anybody in the village closely.

**Question:** If someone in the village did or said something bad to you would you be afraid?

Now I am not afraid anymore. I have the power to protest. They are not saying anything anymore. They will not say anything, they don't have the guts. I am not like that anymore (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

Zohra emphasises the fact that people do not change merely because of access to formal 'education' (*i.e.* reading and writing). When referring to 'education' the GK women have in mind something much broader than simply learning how to read and write. In their world view 'educated people' behave, talk and act in a different way from village people. In aspiring to upward mobility, the GK women learn how to speak and behave like them. As Sharma noted in her study of women's contribution to the urban household in India:

... the experience of having mixed with people of a certain class (even if not originating from that class oneself) [and] familiarity with a certain style of manners and deportment ... [are] assets to her [a woman's] whole household (Sharma 1986:114-115).

Freire, on the other hand, describes this behaviour as a self-depreciation of the oppressed:

[T]he oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his way of life. Sharing his way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration ... the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressor, to imitate him, to follow him (Freire 1972:38).

According to Freire this self-depreciation derives from 'the internalisation of the opinion the oppressors hold of them'.

Almost never do they [the oppressed] realise that they, too, 'know things' (Freire 1972:39).

The behaviour of the women at GK is ambivalent. On the one hand it confirms Freire's argument as the women do identify with the educated middle class. On the other hand by living in the GK community the women have made themselves aware of the fact that they have their own knowledge and own potentials. They
have overcome feelings of internalised inferiority to dominant classes such as the bhodrolok, ‘the urban middle/upper class educated people’.

### 7.3.4 Speaking out

Most women are not afraid of the GK bosses and have learned how to complain and protest when necessary. The GK monthly meetings, where all workers and staff get together to discuss current issues, seem to work quite well as a venue for bringing up complaints. During my stay in GK I saw quite a few women standing up in the GK meetings and complaining in front of all the workers and staff. More than once I saw women demanding higher salaries.

In the meetings I would say for example that I’ve been working for a long time, but my salary has not risen.

**Question: Were you afraid to talk in these meetings?**

No, I am not afraid to speak up (Mimosa, jute plastic fabrication, 24, abandoned).

One way in which women may have learned how to articulate their ideas and speak out in different situations is through attending the GK meetings. One idea behind GK’s meetings is to encourage its members/workers to speak up and offer them space to bring forward complaints of any sort (see Chapter Six). In the general monthly meetings where GK tries very hard to demonstrate democratic practices workers, staff and organisers participate on an equal basis. Everybody sits on the floor on straw mats. There are no hierarchical structures to the meeting. It is chaired by a committee, which has been elected by the members of the organisation and which runs on a rotating principle. Ray describes the GK meeting as a public venue for keeping discipline:

This is an imaginative way of using the democratic process to enforce discipline (Ray 1986:89).

Complaints of all sorts are brought up in this meeting and the ‘accused’ have to justify themselves in front of everybody. Punishment and bonuses within GK are decided in the meetings and form a very strong part of GK’s informal internal structure. One can argue about the effectiveness or appropriateness of such an approach and it does not necessarily appeal to every worker, especially when
they are penalised in front of everybody for breaking the 'rules\textsuperscript{a}'. Likewise speaking up and complaining in front of a large number of people does require a fair amount of confidence and not everybody has the guts to do it. The GK meetings, however, serve as a forum for women to practice speaking out in public, bringing forward complaints of any sort and feeling less self-conscious when talking to others. The confidence women gain during this process feeds into how they behave towards others and how they apply their newly won speaking/protesting power. The women at GK have learned how to speak for themselves in challenging situations.

Obviously not all women are using the meeting as a platform of complaint. There are always some women who are more confident than others and again one has to remember the individual characteristics of each woman. What I would argue, however, is that during my fieldwork I did see quite a few women actively using this opportunity to complain. Others who do not use the meetings themselves as a venue to speak out, still learn indirectly from the experience of watching other women speaking up. This has the potential to reshape their images of women and of themselves. They can see that (other) women are outspoken in GK, that women can say what they want to say and still be respected.

Some women carry with them their confidence and speaking/protesting power to the villages. They have learned to become visible and to make themselves heard in their villages. They have adopted a new and stronger position vis-à-vis the people they once feared and have succeeded in establishing a respectable identity within their own communities. They are challenging hierarchical structures through their behaviour and actions: they talk back and resist conventional norms. Through their behaviour most of them managed to have an influence on others. They have, for example, become role models for other women in their villages, giving them advice, sorting out problems and finding jobs. People trust and respect them and listen to their advice.

Majilla, for example, has taught another woman how to sign her name:

I've taught her with my own hands. Before she never even had the chance to hold a pen in her hands\textsuperscript{9} (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).
Mimosa has found jobs for her sisters:

Now they also want to learn some vocation like me [and] follow my example ... I went to many places to find jobs for my sisters (Mimosa, jute-plastic fabrication, 24, abandoned).

Majilla has persuaded her friend’s husband to be more responsible for his family:

Ramiza’s husband sits idle at home after having graduated. He does not work. She said to me: ‘Majilla-apa, what shall I do? He does not work at all.’ ... Yesterday I managed to convince him to go with my husband to take the job of a digger ...

Question: So after you talked to him he started to work?

Yes ...

Question: Does this happen often that women here help each other when they have problems with their husbands?

Yes and I want everybody to live happily and help each other.

Question: How do you know that other women help each other with their problems?

Well it is quite obvious and I also hear about certain cases (Majilla, ex-GK carpenter, now at EPZ, 25, married).

7.4 Posture, movement and appearance

In this section I look at the ‘masculine’ side of GK work in terms of how it affects women's bodies. In GK women work in ‘masculine jobs’ wearing ‘men’s clothes’ and using ‘masculine tools’. I address the new type of dress (‘work uniform’) they wear and the tools they handle when doing ‘men’s work’. Obviously all these factors play an important role in how women relate to their bodies and their appearance. Wearing ‘men’s clothes’, doing ‘men’s work’ and using ‘men’s tools’ will automatically affect the way women hold their bodies and move in their bodies.
7.4.1 ‘Masculine work’

When referring to ‘men’s work’ I do not equate it with hard physical labour performed by ‘strong masculine bodies’ as opposed to ‘weak feminine bodies’. Peasant women in Bangladesh have always been engaged in strenuous physical labour - on average 10 to 14 hours a day - doing post-harvest work like threshing, husking and boiling; growing vegetables and spices; processing and preserving food and raising poultry and livestock (Farouk and Ali 1975). The type of work they performed before, however, will have resulted in a different way of holding and using the body.

The type of work women perform in GK is stereotyped as ‘men’s work’ in Bangladesh just as it is elsewhere. In general women are not associated with ‘masculine tools’ such as a hammer, a drill or electrical machines. When performing their work at GK the women will necessarily have to move and use their bodies in ways that society would condemn as ‘unfeminine’, involving ‘inappropriate’ exposure of their bodies. This very exposure of their bodies and ‘unfeminine’ movement makes GK women fall outside the norm. Garment work, handicrafts work, kitchen-gardening and poultry-raising are usually more socially acceptable.

*Question:* Did you see GK women working in the carpentry and welding workshops? Would you do these kind of things?

*Gee na!* [strong definite no, she says this very softly and in a very low voice] ... I don’t like women doing that kind of work [low voice].

*Question:* Do you think that men’s and women’s jobs should be different - men will do one kind of work ... [she interrupts my translator by finishing the sentence herself]

... and women will do another kind of work.

*Question:* Tell me, what kind of work should women do?

Handicrafts or tailoring [pause] - a group of women should be sitting somewhere and working (Majeda, young village woman, no exposure to formal work).

This image of women sitting together doing needle work without moving around too much, in other words without ‘exposing their bodies in front of men too much’, seems to be Majeda’s ideal type of work.
In GK, however, the women have to move around. They have to expose their bodies in front of non-relatives, they have to perform an unknown type of work, they have to handle unfamiliar tools and machines and move in unfamiliar ways. What I was interested to know is how their bodies felt when doing these ‘masculine’ movements such as feeling their muscles when hammering all day. The quotations below describe the women’s initial feelings when doing ‘men’s work’.

At first I doubted if I could do this heavy job. I was afraid of the sparks when cutting the iron sheets (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

*Question: Do you feel good about your work now or scared?*

Of course I feel good. I don’t feel scared anymore. Before, I used to feel scared.

*Question: What were you afraid of?*

If the machine burst fire would break out and I would die ... Now I have a clear idea about the machine, how each part works ... so I don’t feel scared anymore (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).

For some of them the first encounter with this unfamiliar type of work was painful. Their eyes would burn from chemicals, the body would ache from unaccustomed movements and long days of hard physical work. Women were doing certain activities for the first time in their life and felt insecure about it. Initially some of them could not imagine being capable of performing certain tasks.

I never thought that women could do all these kinds of jobs. You never see female carpenters anywhere, but I myself am doing it here (Foslema, carpenter, 26, abandoned).
Plates 7.9 and 7.10
Female welders and carpenters at Gonoshashtaya Kendra
Plates 7.11 and 7.12 Jute-plastic fabrication at Gonoshasthaya Kendra
7.4.2 Moving through public space

The GK women were not only exposing their bodies within GK *i.e.* in a closed environment, but also outside the organisation, in public space. In the previous chapter I was speaking of women walking/travelling to the work place from their homes and leaving behind the village boundaries. Unlike many garment women the GK women are now prepared to handle daily encounters on the road. In Kabeer's study the garment women who walked to work avoided direct face-to-face encounters with strangers on the street by 'carrying their purdah with them'.

By their modesty of deportment, by lowering their gaze and covering their heads, by ignoring the comments and catcalls, the women maintained that they carried their purdah with them as they moved through public space. The idiom in which the women spoke often conjured up an image of an invisible protected corridor stretching from the threshold of their homes to the factory gates. These were limits to the 'elasticity' of purdah, however, and for many it only applied in the journey from home to work. Aside from this journey, most women stressed that they rarely went out unless accompanied by an adult male relative (Kabeer 1991:149).

Unlike the garment women, who avoided street encounters and deliberately tried to conform to notions of propriety, the GK women would react to their daily street encounters with strangers in an uninhibited and confident way.

Before coming out of the home I used to feel scared to see 'men'. Now when walking on the streets I am not scared of men anymore. [hearty giggle] What can the men say? They go their way, I go mine. We don't feel scared anymore because we go and come back every day. Now we've got a different kind of ... er ... you know. And previously it was a different kind of ... you know. Now we can give a reply, but before we didn't have that courage (Rita, runs her own laundry service, 25, widow).

Rita is no longer afraid of face-to-face encounters with strangers on the street. She does not have any major problems if unknown men make some kind of comment to her. She says she is able to 'give a reply'. She is not afraid of talking back to strangers.

I once witnessed an event when sitting on a rickshaw with a GK woman, who was helping me locate the house of a woman living in a village nearby. I recognised one of her colleagues on the street who was on her way back home.
She happened to pass a male stranger at the same time as a non-GK woman was passing by. In that moment I had both women in my sight and could observe the way they walked and behaved. The GK woman was walking with a confident stride and did not bother in the slightest about the stranger. When walking past us, she smiled and greeted us and stopped for a chat. The other woman, however, was walking in a more rigid way with her head bent to the side to avoid eye contact with the stranger. It seems as if GK women feel more at ease on the streets than other women. They no longer feel ashamed when moving in public spaces:

I move about freely according to my own will. My mother would say 'can't you walk faster?' I would reply 'what is the need? No one has ever said a bad thing about me' (Zohra, printing press, 23, married).

Whereas Zohra's mother tries to hide her mobility when walking outside by walking faster and hoping no one sees her, Zohra takes her time when moving in public space without the slightest sense of 'shame'. She walks proudly and confidently and is convinced of doing nothing wrong.

The following anecdote is another example of a woman feeling comfortable about moving in public space: One day Shongita finished work in Dhaka quite late in the evening. As a traffic blockade had been announced for the following day she wanted to get back home to be with her daughter. Although she knew she had a long journey home to Savar and it was getting dark she decided not to stay over night at the UNICEF quarters but started heading for home. She got stuck on the road home when she realised that the bus she was on did not take her as far as she needed to go. However, instead of despairing she knew how to help herself. She decided against taking a rickshaw thinking it was too dangerous that late at night for a woman on her own. Instead she stopped the passing cars:

I was raising my hand at every car since I knew how to explain my situation. After a while a microbus came. They recognised me and said 'it's the lady-driver' ... I recognised them as well so I stepped into the car. They said they weren't going as far as GK. I said 'you don't have to, you can drop me at PTC' [the place she was living after she had joined UNICEF as a driver]. They dropped me right at my gate (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, 30, abandoned).

In Shongita's case the fact of getting used to men's company at GK not only helped her in dealing with unknown people in the sense of being able to have a
conversation with them. She has learned to apply her communication skills with people in difficult and risky situations. Whereas she was once too shy even to talk to men (see p. 145), she now has no fear when it comes to approaching unknown men for help.

For other women, like Razia, experiences such as going to Cox's Bazaar on their own, have changed their attitudes to strangers. Instead of being too timid to travel alone and run the risk of being approached by strangers, Razia enjoys travelling and even welcomes any opportunity to meet strangers.

When I go on a journey it doesn't matter if my travel companion is a male or a female. If I feel relaxed and we get into a conversation I can also speak about my personal matters. Look at my brothers. They can't go to Cox's Bazaar alone, but I can do that (Razia, welder, 40, widow).

Unlike her brothers Razia was exposed to travelling in unknown spaces to distant places on her own. Women moving in public spaces, let alone travelling far distances, without the company of a man, is usually condemned as inappropriate behaviour in Bangladesh.

7.4.3 Dress and identity

In a society where notions of propriety and modest conduct play such a significant role, women are also expected to follow official dress codes, wrapping up their bodies in layers of clothes. Such clothes not only stand for women's impeccable morality, but also hinder them from walking and moving their bodies at ease. The uniforms women wear at GK are thus seen as immodest clothing. Therefore GK women already resist general cultural norms and codes of propriety merely by wearing 'men's clothes'.

At first the villagers gossiped a lot about me and put pressure on him [husband] and he beat me. He said: 'if you go to Gonoshasthaya Kendra you will wear no veil; there you wear shirt and pants and then you turn into a bad woman ... (Hassina, manager of handicrafts cooperative at Deposhai, 40, married).
Majeda is a newly wed young woman who has never worked outside her home. She is interested in working, but her husband does not allow her:

**Question:** You said you have seen GK. Did you see women wearing shirts and pants there?

Yes, I did.

**Question:** If you were to work there you would have to do the same. Could you do that?

[Some silence] Gee na.[strong definite no]

**Question:** But then how would you work there?

I would want to do the work, but I would feel uncomfortable with those clothes.

**Question:** You saw the hospital and the other things in GK. Did you like the place?

Yes, I felt good there, but I didn't like those girls who were wearing shirts and pants ...

**Question:** She [pointing at me] is a foreigner and doesn't understand. She wants to know the problem.

Some men have 'kharab nojor' [literally: bad eyes, here it means bad intentions] and if girls work with them, some of their 'nojor' [intentions] will also become 'kharab' [bad]. That is why he [her husband] doesn't like it.

**Question:** Oh, then girls can also get 'kharab nojor' ... [she interrupts and finishes the sentence]

... or they can leave the husband and go to another man.

**Question:** So your husband thinks like that.

Yes, my husband thinks like that (Majeda, 19, no formal work experience, married).

The way we dress is closely related to the way we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. Wearing a work 'uniform', wearing 'pants' and a 'shirt' makes a GK woman look different from a non-'working' woman. To an outsider like me the uniforms symbolised an identification with the organisation. GK has been criticised for forcing this 'unnatural' uniform onto the women. However, staff members who have been with GK from the beginning recall stories of how there
had actually been votes amongst the workers about the issue of wearing the
work uniform or not. The votes had an interesting result: the women from the
welding and carpentry sections in particular expressed a strong interest in the
uniforms for practical reasons, whereas women working in the handicrafts
sections preferred to wear the traditional *salwaar kameez*. Whether this story of
a vote on the uniform is true or not is not that significant. It seems that most
women in GK get used to the uniform fairly quickly and do appreciate its
practicality and the fact that it allows more flexible movements during their
work performance. What is far more intriguing is how these women relate to
their different clothes and hence different identities in terms of masculinity and
femininity.

After Selina, for example, had got used to the idea of wearing the uniform, she
began to feel comfortable in it and now enjoys wearing it.

On the first day I came to GK I was so ashamed to see that girls
were walking around in shirts and trousers. God forbid me! How
could I work clad in shirts and trousers? I had two friends here
who had shirts and trousers made for me, but I said that I couldn't
walk around GK wearing these clothes and I couldn't work with
them. I'd rather work in a *sari*, but coming to work in a *sari* is not
allowed. So they suggested to me to walk around GK the whole day
dressed in shirt and trousers, so that I would stop feeling
uncomfortable with it. Like this, you know, slowly and gradually I
got used to it. Now I don't feel comfortable in a *sari* anymore. I do
wear a *sari* at home, but in fact I like wearing trousers the whole
day (Selina, boiler operator, 35, married, but couple lives apart).
Selina seems to have identified with the work uniform so much that she actually prefers wearing trousers now. Women like Selina, who to a certain extent also identify themselves with the organisation, are usually those who have chosen GK as a proxy family. Although Selina has realistic chances of getting a good job outside, she prefers to stay in GK. In fact she has been living in GK for over ten years.

Living in GK, however, means that she does not have to reconcile the demands of her ‘masculine’ job with cultural expectations of ‘feminine’ propriety as much as other women who live in their own communities or who have regular contact with their communities. These women often find themselves in situations where they are forced to find a way of reconciling their new roles with their social surroundings. What most women tend to do in this situation is to negotiate their work identity with traditional religious and cultural values, taking on multiple identities. They present themselves in a more consciously ‘feminine’ fashion in the village. Their behaviour is more modest and they cover their hair with a headscarf. Once back in their work environment they adapt to the ‘masculinised’ work situation behaving more like a ‘man’, *i.e.* dressing in the expected work outfit (shirt and pants) and expressing their wishes or orders by shouting.

I don’t go about provocatively. I don’t do whatever I like just because I work. I am a woman, so I go about like a woman ... I don’t show off about working in Dhaka ... When I am in Dhaka I adjust myself to the atmosphere, but when I go home I go simply as I used to be (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, 30, abandoned).

This is not to say that GK women are denying the changes that they have experienced. As I have argued above, the women are well aware of how much their lifestyles have been transformed and how others’ perceptions of them have changed. They are, however, prepared to set limits to the display of their own changes and to make compromises as regards their behaviour in the villages in order not to lose village support. They do this by presenting themselves to the villagers as someone ‘who has not changed that much just because she is working’. It is understandable that women try not to jeopardise their position in the communities in which they live and on which they depend.

Many of the GK women have compromised between their work status and their religious beliefs by inventing a new dress for themselves, a hybrid dress that
manages to capture ‘masculinity’/work and ‘femininity’/propriety in one. They wear the GK uniform at work but still keep the worna (cotton scarf) that forms part of the traditional clothes. The worna serves as a symbol of propriety, because whenever the muezzin calls for prayer the women cover their heads with the worna thereby showing respect to Allah. Hence, GK women have designed themselves a new dress that combines work practicality with their religious and cultural values. In this way they succeed in combining their identities as workers and as muslim women.

GK seems to encourage women to wear their wornas, especially when they are carrying out relief work in the more conservative parts of Bangladesh. By wearing a worna women are able to demonstrate a modified version of purdah to the villagers with whom they are confronted, which makes the GK women feel more comfortable. It also helps to release the initial tension and shock villagers from the conservative parts of Bangladesh feel when seeing the team of GK relief workers. The GK team in their uniforms were often mistaken for American marines come to help out in the flooded areas. People would not understand that they were actually women. Seeing these strange ‘unfeminine’ women wearing a worna, though, proves to the villagers that the GK women are not disbelievers.

Another interesting way of balancing ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ identities, I noticed, especially amongst the younger GK women, was women’s discovery of their own sexuality. Unfortunately the issue of sexuality could not really be explored in the interviews. I was handicapped by my limited knowledge of Bengali and the choice of my translators. As mentioned in Chapter Three my first translator was an 18 year old Bengali woman who would not have felt comfortable discussing sexuality and my other translators were male university students with whom the GK women might have felt uncomfortable about confiding in such private matters. I believe that GK women would be prepared to discuss sexuality and it remains an area to explore for future research.

What I could observe, however, was women’s behaviour and attitude towards themselves as women. Discussions with Hashemi triggered off thoughts on women discovering their femininity. He was referring to his observation of women involved with the Grameen Bank (women receiving credit) and how they
would not wear rags anymore. He argued that they began to feel differently about themselves because of their ability to buy new clean clothes. In the case of the GK women it was particularly fascinating to watch how they changed from one identity to the other. They would be working in their ‘masculine’ uniforms during the day and once work was over they would change into their ‘feminine’ outfit. I observed this moment of identity switch with the laundry women. After work they would usually get rid of the dirty work clothes, wash themselves, comb their hair, use coconut oil to make it smooth and shiny, put on fresh colourful looking saris and do up their hair and use some make-up and lipstick. I watched them make themselves look pretty and very ‘feminine’.

Remarkable was the fact that they were using lipstick, which is something GK women are not supposed to do in GK. GK has its own rules, one of which is ‘no lipstick for women at work’. Observing women use this ‘forbidden’ lipstick after work and observing also how good they feel about it revealed to me how GK women are capable of resisting behavioral norms and controls even when these come from GK itself.

When speaking of women making themselves ‘pretty’ and ‘feminine’ by buying new clothes and lipstick, I am not referring to them as victims of consumerism who turn into pretty dolls in order to please men. The point I am trying to make here is that they discover their femininity and enjoy it. According to Hashemi, once women stop concentrating on pure survival, they are free to reflect on themselves. In this sense, I would argue that the women I observed at GK became aware of their potential when performing in so-called ‘men’s jobs’ and behaving, dressing and shouting like men; but at the same time they have also discovered themselves as human beings and as women with their sexualities and desires.
7.4.4 Women's new appearance in public

How does a GK woman appear to the outside observer? What impact do women's new forms of 'dress' and new or transformed postures and manners have on their appearance in public? How do they present themselves in their 'new'/'transformed'/'empowered' bodies to others?

If you put a GK woman and any other woman from a similar background in the same room, you would immediately recognise the GK woman. I don't know what it is, but you would know (Akhter, personal communication, 1995).

Reflecting on my own impressions of the women I met during my fieldwork, I would argue that most GK women carry an air of confidence with them when presenting themselves to the outsider. The confident appearance radiates through their bodies by the way they look at you, the way they hold their bodies, the way they move, the way they talk to you, the way they themselves feel about and relate to their own bodies.

I recall my first impression of Mahmuda, the security guard, with whom I almost immediately became friends. There was something about the way she looked and moved in her white Mao outfit with heavy black boots. I saw her every day at the gate, when she opened the gate and had a friendly chat with the people coming or going. I observed the way she would greet me, the way she sat in the security hut during her duty with her legs comfortably resting on the table. She struck me as incredibly self-confident. She had a cool, relaxed, down-to-earth way of moving and holding her body. When she walked she held her body proud and upright. The way she looked at me was to look directly at me i.e. have direct eye contact with me as well as with my male translators. This and her way of talking gave me the impression of a young, confident, content, sound and healthy and very independent person. In her uniform she sometimes appeared a bit boyish, but at the same time had a strong air of 'feminine' and flirtatious radiance about her. In those first days at GK when I met her, I somehow pictured her in Doc Martins and Jeans strolling around London. Her 'masculine uniform' and 'look' reminded me of the way young western women dress and move, but there was nothing macho, unnatural or false and westernised about her movements and
appearance. She just came across as very strong and powerful in her GK ‘dress’.

Mahmuda’s appearance when dressed in a sari did not change her confident attitude, but it slightly altered her ‘femininity’. When wearing a sari, her movements became softer and smoother. The material of a sari is usually softer and more refined than the coarse GK uniform. Also the way the material is wrapped around a woman’s body several times automatically limits her movements. There is an art to wearing a sari and although it is nothing but a long piece of cloth the act of ‘wrapping it around’ the body is very sophisticated and makes a woman look graceful even if she is dressed in the cheapest and simplest sari.

Mahmuda’s ‘beauty’ stemmed from her confident appearance. In this context I remember one anecdote I was told about a woman who came to GK after her husband had abandoned her. Years later, when he saw her again, he saw her with different eyes: her appearance had changed and he wanted her back. She had become beautiful to him. Najma mentions a similar attitude from her husband:

Question: You go to work, you can walk in the streets alone and move around freely. Does your husband look at all this with ‘good eyes’ or does he disapprove of it?

He thinks well of it.

Question: Why does he think well of it?

You see, I dress beautifully. I make myself beautiful (Najma, laundry, 20, married).

Women have changed their appearance in public. They have gained a confident appearance and have the ability to present themselves at home or in their communities in new ways. Women’s bodies have gone through a process of transformation. The discovery of their voices and their resistance to cultural norms of appropriate behaviour has had an impact on women’s ability to communicate and interact with people. They have acquired communication skills. They also perceive their bodies in new ways: holding themselves upright, they walk and move proudly instead of hiding behind their ‘veils’. Most of them keep
direct eye contact, instead of averting their gaze and move in their bodies within different and new spaces without feeling ashamed. They face challenges and can talk back to strangers, rather than shy away. Women’s bodies are constantly undergoing a process of transformation and they react to a combination of external and internal forces. These forces relate to situations and experiences within GK, but are also interrelated with experiences women encounter when going out of their homes, when experiencing the world beyond the familiar ‘home/village’ context and when engaging in ‘street encounters’. All these forces feed into women turning into physically empowered people.

I have given examples of individual women’s new appearance within the organisation, at home and in their villages. The GK women participate, however, in a wider community: that of the national women’s movement. One has to imagine all the GK women - approximately 200 - as a collective when participating in the women's marches in Dhaka where they line up with about 1000 women from all the other women’s organisations in Bangladesh. To any outside observer the marches of this huge group of united women leaves an enormous impact. Seeing and hearing thousands of women shouting out their rights whilst marching confidently in groups of two on the streets of Dhaka is a powerful image of strong, aggressive, women’s bodies claiming their place in public.
7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored ‘embodied empowerment’ drawing together results of the discussions on women’s economic well-being (see Chapter Five) as well as their transformed awareness (see Chapter Six). Both levels of empowerment feed into the practical side of empowerment, i.e. how women act out empowerment with their bodies. Economic and attitudinal changes manifest themselves in women’s body language, physical appearance and behaviour towards others.

Women talk and move with an air of confidence. They have overcome inhibitions about moving in public. They walk home without male protection and move alone at night. They have overcome their fear of talking to strangers. Now they feel comfortable to approach strangers. They are no longer too timid to shout at men, to have a conversation with an ‘educated’ person, to speak up in front of a big group and to articulate their interests and complain to their bosses. They are confident to travel alone and are now claiming a place for themselves in public. Through their actions and behaviour they challenge patriarchal and cultural constraints in their homes and communities and act as role models for other women.

Overall, this chapter has given an account of how women have learned to no longer deny their bodies. I will end this section with a poem by Tasleema Nasrin, the controversial exiled Bangladeshi feminist. The poem is interesting in this context as it directly refers to women’s bodies. There is no reference to the classical empowerment goals such as increasing women’s awareness and consciousness, asking women to fight for their rights and dignity. Nasrin simply demands that women should claim back their own bodies first. Before being able to fight for their rights as individuals or collectively, women first need to realise that their bodies belong to them, that they are their own. They need to realise that their bodies are no longer the locus of social control and surveillance, but that they themselves control their bodies. Nasrin seems to ask women to claim back their bodies from society which can then lead to a redefinition of their bodies in the sense that they will now use and see them in the ways they want to, according to their own wishes.
Live woman, learn to live fiercely.
If you are human, break these chains and rise.
Break the chains with your two hands, they are yours.
Run with your two feet, they are yours.
See life with your eyes, laugh loud, those lips are yours.
You are wholly yours, entirely yours.

(Tasleema Nasrin 1994, translated by Sangeeta Datta)

Notes

1. See also Schilling (1993:90) on the regulation of female sexuality by systems of patriarchal power in the Victorian period. He cites Turner (1984), who associates 'agoraphobia' (literally: fear of urban areas and the market place) with the legitimisation of the husband's power over his wife. Women supposedly suffered from 'agoraphobia', which prevented them from going to the market place themselves.


3. ‘Others’ here refers to people other than family members, relatives and neighbours with whom village women would communicate on a daily basis.

4. The depiction of women as shy and ‘not able to talk’ is not limited to Bangladesh. It runs through the history of women and education. In the West it is still fairly common to consider articulate speech and confident language presentation in public places (universities, politics etc) as typically ‘masculine’ features.


6. The fact that I did not spend as much time with the GK women’s husbands and the village women as compared to the women at GK will have also had an influence on the way they responded to me during the interviews.

7. One should keep in mind, however, that the administrative structures in GK are highly hierarchical and that the dominant position of the director remains unchallenged.

8. See Chapter Four.

9. Figurative: a penless person is an illiterate.

Chapter Eight: Rethinking empowerment

8.1 Challenges to the discourse of empowerment

In this thesis I have explored the lived and embodied experiences of empowerment of women involved in the Bangladeshi development organisation GK. I made this choice because I believe that both feminist and development-oriented research have still not listened enough to the people they claim to represent. The feminist empowerment literature has concentrated more on theorising empowerment, rather than analysing how women experience empowerment in practice. In development work, donor-financed project evaluation, rather than research based on the perspectives of NGO participants, still predominates. Recently more gender-oriented development literature has picked up on empowerment issues, but most of this work equates the concept with economic empowerment (Carr et al. 1996, Holcombe 1995, Mizan 1994, Safilios-Rothschild and Mahmud 1989, Sogra 1994, Todd 1996, van Koppen and Mahmud 1996, Wageningen Agricultural University and Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies 1992). One recent book on empowerment, for example, carries the promising title: ‘Speaking out: women’s economic empowerment in South Asia’ (Carr et al. 1996). However, only in its last page does the book pick up on the first part of its title, pointing out that

... one of the most common expressions of significant change from the women’s own perspective is their new lack of fear and their new-found ability to speak out at all levels so as to share problems, make demands, negotiate and bargain, and participate in public speaking and decision-making (Carr et al. 1996:218).

The rest of the book illustrates different case studies with an overall emphasis on economic change. I understand the concept of empowerment, however, in terms of a holistic approach, which goes beyond the economic. In my research I therefore investigated the process of women's empowerment from all angles. I examined the socio-economic, socio-political and embodied dimensions of empowerment. I found it important to include the transformation of women's bodies in my analysis as empowerment is also a bodily expression. I understand the 'body techniques' (Mauss 1973) (e.g. raising voices, keeping direct eye-contact, walking upright, etc) that women have acquired through their involvement at GK.
as essential acts of empowerment. In the context of South Asian feminist debates, where strategies designed to raise women’s awareness and consciousness form the dominant themes, the notion of embodied empowerment is a pivotal contribution to the contemporary discourse.

8.2 GK’s empowerment approach and women’s experiences of empowerment

This section provides a summary of my research findings starting with GK’s approach towards empowerment and continuing with a description of the changes women underwent when involved with GK. As change is not exclusively stimulating, but can also be an intensive, painful and contradictory experience I include women’s strategies of reconciling their new roles and identities with their beliefs and cultural norms in this discussion.

8.2.1 GK’s empowerment approach

At the beginning of this thesis I introduced Kabeer’s concept of the ‘transformatory potential’ of NGO strategies, which entails the provision of ‘new economic resources’, the creation of new forms of ‘collective relationships’ for women and the promotion of ‘collective action’ (Kabeer 1995a:115). I understand GK as a ‘contested’ site where women’s empowerment practices take place and present it in its dual role as an employer providing women with ‘new economic resources’ (Figure 8.1) and as a gender-sensitive organisation creating ‘collective relationships’ offering the potential for ‘collective action’ (Figure 8.2). Figure 8.1 illustrates how GK influences women’s empowerment through its non-traditional training and employment programmes.
Figure 8.1 GK: the alternative employer

In its role as an alternative employer, GK:
* offers non-traditional work for women
* offers fringe benefits
* frees (some) women from certain household responsibilities
* challenges norms constraining women's mobility and visibility
* contests the notion that women need protection and guardianship
* contests women's sole identification with the family
* contests notions of propriety and 'shame'
* provides space for new social relations
* offers (some) women responsibility in their jobs
* aims to create new images of women
* challenges women's traditional roles.

Figure 8.1 highlights GK's approach towards women's empowerment from the perspective of an 'alternative employer'. By training and employing women in technical and vocational trades and services, it is contesting women's traditional roles in society. The unconventional type of work in which women engage at GK transforms their self-perception, behaviour towards others and bodily landscapes.

GK is different from profit-oriented employers, as, in addition to fringe benefits such as pension schemes and life insurances, it offers its workers housing and eating facilities, child care provision, their own bank accounts, medical and family planning services, schooling for the workers and their children and leisure facilities such as a tea stall, television room, library, musical evenings and other entertainments. By providing facilities such as hostels, medical services, a canteen that serves hot meals and a child care centre, GK partially frees those women who live in GK from time-consuming household responsibilities like cleaning, cooking, looking after the children, kitchen gardening, poultry raising, caring for the sick and elderly, preparing and conserving food. However, for women commuting to GK from their villages - and these constitute the majority - a double burden usually remains. Afsar (1990), who undertook a small survey
at Nari Kendra, admitted that no details on gender relations and the double burden were available in her study. She assumed that ‘the fact that a dominant majority of them ... did not face any problem in combining their present work with domestic responsibility, may be considered as indicative of their bargaining power in the households’ (Afsar 1990:23). I find her assumption too simplistic as women’s bargaining power in the households is just not as clear cut as that. As illustrated in Chapter Five some women managed to renegotiate household arrangements and some women’s intra-household bargaining power did increase, but in other cases domestic work was compressed into the early morning and late evening hours or taken over by other female household members. GK should therefore take this issue into further consideration.

Whilst GK may well free some women from certain reproductive activities, it expects in return a strong work commitment and dedication from its trainees and employees. ‘Freeing’ women from certain reproductive activities in order to maximise their productive activities in their role as ‘workers’ is the other side of the coin. The women working at GK have to adapt to many new expectations and demands. They are required to be flexible, mobile and visible. This has an impact on their behaviour. They become visible in their daily travels to work, walking in the streets or using public transport. The fact that women can be seen walking in the streets and travelling in buses alone or in groups, but without the company of a man, is becoming part of a wider process in Bangladesh. It is a new trend, where women are beginning to claim public spaces, thus transforming rural landscapes.

The GK women, however, are not just becoming visible, but are actively engaging in ‘street encounters’, unlike women working in garment factories, who still ‘carry their purdah with them’ (Kabeer 1991:149) on their way to work. Through their involvement with GK women are also exposed to travel to distant places when performing relief work in the coastal areas or participating in training courses abroad. GK thus creates situations in which women have to learn how to deal with confrontations in unknown regions: a far more intimidating terrain than the daily work-home route. Women have to travel to these distant places on their own and are deprived of conventional forms of male protection and guardianship. Men’s dominance in their roles as protectors and guardians of
women's virtue, bread-winners and heads of family is slowly being undermined as GK continues to rupture notions of 'classical family life'. GK deliberately challenges traditional norms of women's propriety and the notion of lagga (shame), but has also been criticised for being too rigorous in the implementation of this goal. Sometimes families are torn apart, when due to particular work circumstances partners are forced to work in different areas. Sometimes families are separated for months during flood construction work in the coastal areas. GK does not make any allowance for newly married women (noutun bou), who are usually under special surveillance in Bangladeshi society, and may even send them abroad alone. Women are left with no option but to make every day decisions by themselves. By making women confront conventional family values and notions of shame GK seems to envision the emergence of a new independent woman. Other innovative images of women conceived in GK are, for example, women operating machines, women handling 'masculine' tools, women performing technical jobs etc. The most successful innovative female model at GK was that of the paramedics on bicycles. GK was the first organisation to send women out (to the surrounding villages) on bicycles, which at that time - early 1970s - was perceived as revolutionary, shocking and way too radical for the Bangladeshi rural context. Nowadays, however, GK women on bicycles have become an accepted sight in the surrounding villages and other organisations such as BRAC are following this model (see Goetz 1996a, Goetz and Sen Gupta 1995).

To sum up, as an 'alternative employer' GK challenges women's traditional roles in more than one way (not only through the type of work it offers the women). It makes them leave their homes behind, exposes them to travel without male protection, 'frees' (some of) them from specific family responsibilities and makes them appear and perform work in 'masculine' clothes, handle 'masculine' tools and interact with non-family related men.

Figure 8.2 shows how GK has an influence on women's lives by providing space for social interaction. The discussion moves from GK's function as an employer towards its role as a 'gender-sensitive' organisation which encourages the establishment of 'collective relationships' with the potential to lead to 'collective action'.
As a gender-sensitive organisation, GK:
* provides space for social interaction and collective relationships
* offers literacy and awareness-raising programmes
* offers access to knowledge and information
* offers personal and general advice
* offers discussion rounds on gender and class-related issues
* promotes a sense of solidarity and unity
* engages women in group meetings
* promotes equal rights
* creates space for friendships and ‘adda’
* creates space for sharing experiences of oppression
* serves as a ‘fallback’ position and family surrogate for women without alternative support networks
* employs staff from the grassroots in leadership positions
* works at freeing women from feeling ‘shame’
* links women to a wider community *i.e.* the national women’s movement.

GK is a place where women have the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds and regions. It provides room for social interaction. The ‘family atmosphere’ the organisation has created through its communal set-up and the strong emphasis on collectivity, which constitutes a major part of GK’s philosophy, contribute strongly to the formation of social relations. Women’s reaction and adaptation to the new environment in which they find themselves is twofold. Firstly they develop friendships and relationships of trust with other women and secondly they begin to feel more confident and assertive towards men. Being given the space to make new friends, to engage in ‘adda’ with other members of the organisation, learn about the situation of other women, and exchange experiences of oppression with others lays the foundation for a sense of solidarity, unity, belonging and togetherness. For many women the organisation complemented or even replaced family and kinship support.
networks. This group feeling and sense of mutual support acts as a source of strength for the women. The other factor contributing significantly to this ‘family atmosphere’ is that most of GK’s staff members come from the grassroots, in other words from similar backgrounds to the women employees. They are therefore approachable and accessible allies in the women’s struggle for empowerment, because women new to GK can identify with people from their own background far better than with those from other classes.

Another part of GK’s empowerment approach comprises its literacy and awareness-raising programmes aimed at broadening women’s horizons. In these programmes women are encouraged to discuss and reflect on gender and class-related issues and problems. Although the awareness-raising agenda has stagnated over the years, GK meetings still play a major role in women’s learning process. They cover a broad range of issues. Besides keeping its members informed of commercial and other activities within GK, the meetings are also designed to offer them a place for complaints and to encourage women in particular to speak up and articulate their ideas in front of everyone. Through these experiences women have become far more assertive than they used to be. The atmosphere of familiarity and intimacy GK has managed to maintain since its origin in the early 1970s helps women feel more comfortable and at ease when relating with people who are not their relatives. With time they get used to people who are initially ‘strangers’ and begin to lose their inhibitions towards them. They feel less intimidated and shy when relating with the men in GK, because these men have become part of the ‘family’ community. Women’s behaviour towards men therefore changes, and this is expressed through their body comportment. The women in GK present themselves towards men within the organisation and also, after some time, towards other men (in their families and communities) with an air of confidence and partly also defiance. They are beginning to challenge established cultural norms of ideal Bengali womanhood and this change manifests itself in women’s transformed bodies (see below).

Equal rights and women’s rights are promoted in GK’s awareness-raising programmes and women are encouraged to challenge gender and class hierarchies. Equality exists within the agency, however, only to a certain degree. In the workshops male and female trainees and employees are treated equally.
Doctors, staff and members alike have to participate every morning in the agricultural work. In the meetings everybody sits on the floor without any preferential treatment for staff or directors. The meetings also follow democratic principles and provide space for ‘women’s own voices to be heard’ (Kabeer 1994:230). However, GK members do not participate in higher management decision-making, nor do they evince a sense of ‘ownership’ of the organisation. Through its link to the national women’s movement, however, GK has opened up a wider forum for women, where they can express themselves and their gender needs within the realms of a larger and more powerful community than that of the individual organisation.

8.2.2 Women’s experiences of empowerment

Figures 8.3, 8.4 and 8.5 draw together the major changes that have taken place in women’s lives since joining GK. In my research I looked at empowerment from different angles: the socio-economic (Figure 8.3), socio-political (Figure 8.4) and embodied (Figure 8.5) dimensions of change. These categories of change, however, are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are strongly interrelated. The empowerment process is a dynamic, ongoing process, where the indicators of change are fluid, overlapping with and influencing each other.

Figure 8.3 describes socio-economic aspects of change related to GK as a workplace. As far as material change is concerned my findings are similar to other research on women’s participation in the formal labour market or in NGO income generation/credit programmes (Chen 1989, Hashemi and Schuler 1993, Kabeer 1991, 1995b, Kibria 1995, Siddiqui 1991).
Figure 8.3 Socio-economic dimensions of empowerment

Socio-economic dimensions of empowerment include:

* learning particular skills
* ensuring/contributing to the survival/well-being of one's self and family
* earning one's own living and not burdening others
* ensuring more regular and better quality food intake for self and family
* being able to finance children's (siblings') education
* being able to support parents
* investing money in land or other assets
* spending money on personal purchases
* saving money in a bank account
* changing perceptions of work
* gaining an increased sense of self-worth by becoming a social person
* being able to live without male guardians
* improving one's bargaining position within the household
* having an alternative to an oppressive marriage
* changing attitudes to marital relationships by envisioning more egalitarian forms of family life.

In my case study most women's incomes were essential to their family's survival and well-being. Once minimum needs were met, the women could also start thinking and planning for the family's future and in particular for their children's futures, which according to Hashemi and Schuler (1993) are 'proxy' indicators of empowerment. Besides taking care of the immediate family's needs some women also financed their siblings' education. Some women also managed to support their parents instead of being a liability to them. Sharma (1985) and Standing (1985) have described this phenomenon, in the Indian context, as entailing a shift of responsibility from sons to daughters.
Women's access to income-earning opportunities, however, does not necessarily imply that they control their income. The literature on women and work in Bangladesh describes most women handing over income to their male guardians. This is also common in GK, but there are individual cases where the women were actively involved in handling cash. One of GK’s strengths is the fact that it provides women with their own bank accounts. Some of the women at GK have invested their own money in small businesses or bought their own house or some land. Most women said they managed to spend some money on personal things such as clothes or cosmetics and others managed to put money aside either in the GK bank or elsewhere. All these money dealings are atypical activities for women in Bangladeshi society and challenge cultural norms that keep women away from money and the market sphere.

The women in GK, however, did not experience material changes alone as a result of their work activities. Formal employment and earning one's own living also raise a person's social status. For most women GK was their first experience of formal work. This meant they were becoming a social being. As they said: ‘money brings respect’, such that ‘who has money is known by everyone'. In that sense women’s attitude to formal work changed in that it was perceived not only as a means of survival, but as a way of gaining more respectability in their lives. The ‘masculine’ type of work they performed at GK made them discover their own potential. Many of them began to associate their work at GK with feelings of pride, satisfaction, a sense of equal capacity with men and a sense of responsibility. They realised that with their skills they were able to help others in need and teach others what they had learned. These experiences built up women's confidence and self-esteem, which led to an increased sense of self-worth.

When analysing how women’s work experience at GK had affected the renegotiation of gender roles within the household I decided not to apply standard decision-making models. The basic assumption of these models, in which women’s access to income supposedly leads to increased decision-making power in the household (see, for example, Hashemi and Schuler 1993), fails to acknowledge the complexity of decision-making processes. Instead of trying to quantify women’s decision-making role by comparing how many decisions women
made before and after joining GK, I focused on women’s own (re)definition of their roles and identities. Women felt they were in a better bargaining position within the household. They said their husbands respected them more, listened more to them than before, and discussed decisions jointly with their wives. A few women even managed to renegotiate household arrangements. In one case, for example, the husband became responsible for household affairs, whereas his wife took over the breadwinner role.

In this context Kabeer (1995b:28) suggests we should broaden the focus from ‘decisions concerning intra-household allocational issues to the broader aspects of women’s lives’. She speaks of women’s capacity to form alternative living arrangements, in other words their ability to live alone (or with other women) without the protection of a male guardian or the possibility of women considering leaving an oppressive marriage. Part of my findings confirm Kabeer’s (1995b:35) notion of work as an alternative to oppressive marriages. In Kabeer’s study of female garment workers, this applied, however, only to the occasional exceptions. The majority of women with whom she talked did not walk out of oppressive marriages. In GK, on the other hand, quite a few women have done precisely this. For some women GK had already become a surrogate family. Currently twenty per cent of the women surveyed live in the GK hostel without their male guardians (see Table 4.11, p. 115). One mainly tends to associate garment factory work with this ‘new’ phenomenon of women co-habiting in hostels (messing), something unheard of before. In GK, however, women have been sharing rooms since its origins in the early 1970s, as GK offers shelter and housing facilities particularly to women who have nowhere to go to.

Some women at GK perceived work either as a means to delay or to escape marriage/ remarriage or as a form of security (i.e. a means of survival should their marriages break down). The women were also aware of the fact that they were competing with men in the labour market and that in some cases (e.g. garment factories) they were even preferred to men. The women’s accounts suggested that their attitudes towards marital relationships have changed. As a result of their increased economic independence they expressed the wish for more egalitarian forms of marital life based on an equal division of housework and mutual understanding. The customary notion of the husband’s ultimate
superiority and authority was questioned by the majority of the women at GK. As one can see here work- and not purely work-related aspects of empowerment (e.g. women's experiences at the GK meetings, the awareness-raising programmes and women's exchanges with other women) tend to overlap.

**Figure 8.4 Socio-political dimensions of empowerment**

Socio-political dimensions of empowerment include:
* transgressing village boundaries
* accessing information beyond women's home communities
* broadening their horizon and political awareness
* participating in critical and abstract discussions
* taking on new identities beyond the family identity
* claiming their right to education and work
* aspiring to upward mobility
* contesting social taboos
* redefining notions of propriety
* developing/strengthening class and gender consciousness
* rejecting dowry practices
* contesting notions of 'son-preference'
* resisting patriarchal violence and intimidation
* forming new (non-kin) collective relationships
* establishing solidarity networks
* demanding better quality family and work relationships
* demanding equal rights for women on a national platform.

The changes described in Figure 8.4 are related to women's experiences at GK as a place where they had access to knowledge and information beyond the village level and where they engaged in social interaction with many other people. GK's unique set-up as a self-sufficient collective is one of the factors that most encourages women's empowerment in this context. Women's learning processes and relations with other people in GK led to a change in their life styles and world views. They now rejected former restrictions imposed on them when living in the villages (e.g. restrictions on their mobility, limited access to
education and information etc). Through participation in meetings, adult education and awareness-raising programmes and conversations with others, women's horizons broadened and they achieved a greater sense of political awareness. During this learning process women also developed an ability to participate in critical and abstract discussions.

The women no longer identified themselves as 'illiterate, ignorant village women', but took on new identities beyond their family identity. They also contested the notion of education being reserved for the rich only. Education was seen as a significant asset in their own and their children's (both sons' and daughters') lives. Access to education and (what the women described as) an urbanising environment at GK has influenced the way they now perceive themselves as being a member of a wider community. Women are also identified by others in a different way from before. Now they are identified as members of an organisation. As a result of GK being well-known for its medical work in the surrounding areas the women have acquired a new role as 'medical' women in their villages, thus serving as a link between the agency and the village communities.

By breaking general notions of appropriate female behaviour the women are beginning to challenge cultural and patriarchal constraints. Working at GK means that they have to leave their villages behind, walk to work without being accompanied by a man and engage in 'men's work'. The women have countered religious disapproval of their work at GK with arguments such as fulfilling a moral responsibility to ensure their own and their families' survival. The women have constructed their own particular belief and religious practices around their working lives and identities (hybrid dress, impeccable sexual behaviour etc).

Through their experiences at GK women have developed a strong belief in equality, which manifests itself in their rejection of dowry practices, the notion of son-preference and violent marital behaviour. In oppressive situations they now know how and where to find support (through the police or courts or their own friends).

The friendships and relationships of trust women have established in GK have
strengthened their sense of solidarity with other women within and beyond the organisation. GK’s involvement in relief work in the coastal areas was described by the women interviewed as a rewarding and stimulating experience, kindling feelings of solidarity with the rural poor. Women’s individual struggles for change have merged with others to form a wider platform in the national women’s movement in which many organisations have gathered as a unified movement for social change. Women have collectively demanded better family and work relationships, equal access to work and education and equal rights for women. Participating in the national women’s movement has led to an identification with a broader political cause, a new experience for them, as women are rarely encouraged to participate in political activities of any kind.

Figure 8.5 illustrates transformations of women’s bodies. It brings together women’s experiences of having had access to empowering skills (learning a particular type of work, literacy), information and knowledge as well as having been given the space to interact and communicate with others and establish friendships and solidarity networks with others.

**Figure 8.5 Embodied dimensions of empowerment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embodied dimensions of empowerment include:</th>
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<tr>
<td>* changing women’s relation to their own body</td>
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<tr>
<td>* using their body consciously and deliberately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* raising voices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* laughing loudly and unashamedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* making themselves heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>* talking with non-relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* becoming less intimidated by men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* crossing boundaries of village language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* speaking out (in GK, at home and in their communities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* exposing their bodies and engaging in ‘masculine’ activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>* expressing their own ‘femininity’ and sexuality</td>
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<tr>
<td>* gaining a new appearance in public</td>
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<tr>
<td>* redefining and claiming public spaces for women</td>
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Most women at GK have changed their relation to their own body. Realising, for example, that they are capable of performing the same activities as men led to women discovering their own potentials and capacities. The women are using their bodies in a more conscious way after having acquired new ‘body techniques’ (Mauss 1973). They speak in a louder voice and adopt different ways of holding and moving the body, because of the demands of the specific type of work and the environment created at GK. Women had to learn how to use their bodies in new ways in order to be able to perform work at GK efficiently. Each type of activity demanded a certain body posture and movement, which left an impact on the overall body management. Besides the individual requirements of the specific work assignments at GK, women also had to adapt to the fact of having to work with non-family related men on a very intimate level. The women were also exposed to communicating and interacting with people from different classes and with different educational backgrounds. All these new experiences had to be absorbed and left an impact on women’s bodily performances. Their confidence in what they were doing increased. Eventually they began to feel less intimidated about shouting at men and to make themselves heard. They became used to confronting face-to-face encounters with strangers and lost their shyness when approaching strangers. They became confident in expressing and articulating their gender needs and interests.

The GK women spoke differently from the way village women would speak. They possessed a more elaborate vocabulary and tended to incorporate sophisticated words into their conversations. Occasionally they slipped in an English word they had picked up somewhere. They would talk in a clear and fluent manner and keep direct eye contact with the other person. When the need arises women are now confident about speaking out on various levels. They complain, protest and ‘talk back’ in GK, at home and in their communities. Although GK’s higher level management structure might reflect the prevailing culture of hierarchy and patronage, women do not behave towards their authorities in a physically deferential manner. They respect their bosses, but do not back away from them, nor do they look to the ground when being talked to. They are prepared to confront their bosses when demanding higher wages, for example.

At GK women had to get used to exposing their bodies in front of non-related
men. The activities they are engaged in are not typical for women. They have to perform in 'unfeminine' work, move in 'unfeminine' ways, dress in 'unfeminine' clothes and handle tools and machines. Translated into their new body language, however, this meant that the women began to maintain their posture in an upright position, walk with a confident stride, dress and move according to their own taste and pace and express their 'femininity' and sexuality in their own ways. They have gained a new appearance within the GK boundaries and in public spaces, individually and collectively (e.g. in marches). Overall women have begun to redefine and claim public spaces.

8.2.3 Women's strategies of balancing between conflicting demands

If I were asked whether the gender roles and identities of the women at GK had changed I would say yes. What one needs to keep in mind, though, is the fact that empowerment is a long, slow and at times contradictory process. As Megna Guhathakurta, an academic and activist in the Bangladeshi women's movement, points out:

... oppressive conditions drive women to free themselves and leave their homes, but they still think this is an exceptional case and not the normal thing to do. Sometimes these experiences radicalise women in their thoughts. They might think 'why shouldn't I do this?' At such a moment an organisation like GK can offer support and it becomes something women can hold on to in bad times. Then it depends on the individual women's personalities and how the organisation influences them. Radicalisation might develop further while they are there. Some women might overcome their mental block, whereas others might not. It depends how much they think the organisation can offer them an alternative lifestyle that makes them happy. Some women might also think after some time that going back home and marriage will make them happy (Megna Guhathakurta).

The transformations I described earlier apply to each woman, but on different scales. The actual degree of overall change and empowerment depends on the individual woman's personality, history, socio-economic background, current situation, the family environment in which she lives, the time she has spent in GK as well as what she thinks GK has to offer her. All women have experienced
change in some way or the other since joining GK, but not all have the same perception of it. The majority of the women with whom I talked believed strongly in the changes taking place in their lives and interpreted them in positive, powerful and meaningful terms. They were proud and satisfied of who they had become and how they had developed over time. Some seemed to have taken their changes so much for granted that they forgot their initial battles as their histories and reference points began to fade into the past. There were also women, however, who were still struggling with change. They were still in the process of adjusting to the new social surroundings and expectations. In this section I therefore point out the difficulties some of the women experienced and still are experiencing when confronting the socially defined order. Based on the women's own accounts and my observations I shall describe on which occasions women were still mediating their own changes with the expected norms of behaviour and how exactly they did so.

Women were forced to negotiate their new roles with their immediate families and communities. The interviews suggest that women's immediate families were no longer the major obstacles to women's empowerment. The older women remembered family objections when they started at GK in the 1970s. They reacted either by ignoring these objections, convincing their family members of the benefits of work (i.e. securing survival of the family and a better future) or searching for allies in the family. Nowadays, however, and particularly in the light of unstable employment conditions for men in the stagnant agricultural labour market, not that many women face direct objections from their families. Women find themselves in a situation where men are losing their breadwinner roles. The way some women dealt with this was by either consciously or unconsciously letting their husbands believe themselves still to be the official heads of the family. In some of these cases the woman would even earn a higher and more regular income than her spouse and would also be better educated than him, but would still describe the husband as the one 'who knew best'. A few women quite happily handed over their income to their husband and left major decisions to him with these words: 'that will be his headache, not mine'.

In the communities women had to face more opposition, particularly from powerful and influential figures such as village elders and religious leaders.
Women feared village gossip, 'bad talking' and community sanctions. In this context one has to keep in mind that the degree of objection depends very much on the individual woman's status. Widows without any other support, for example, are less likely to be ostracised by society. Women working is not as problematic as it used to be: married women also leave their homes and go to work nowadays. The type of work women perform, in what circumstances they work and whether or not those circumstances put their virtue at risk are the issues at stake. In that sense the work women perform at GK and the intimate daily interaction with non-relatives are matters of concern. Women are therefore forced to defend their new work identities within their communities.

Some women balance their multiple identities by behaving and presenting themselves differently according to the environment in which they find themselves. When at work in GK they take on the worker's identity and behave accordingly. In their home villages, however, they downplay their newly won independence and behave, move, talk and dress in a non-provocative way. They try to give the impression that they have 'not changed that much just because they are working'. Others have decided to detach themselves from their former village lifestyle. They depict village life as deterrent to any form of progression and stereotype village women as 'trapped victims' of village society. These women defend their new work identity by dichotomising the villages and the 'educated, urbanised and modern' environment at GK. In some cases women have cut all former ties to their villages and made GK their new home.

Women also find themselves in situations where they have to reconcile their work identities with their religious identities. They do this by adapting religion to their particular circumstances and needs. Again a common way of doing this is through differentiating themselves from the 'religious' village women, the 'purdasin' i.e. those women, who according to societal norms, behave in the correct way by not leaving their home or village and by maintaining purdah. The GK women defend their work identities by distinguishing themselves, the 'good Muslim women', from those who only pretend to be good externally, by wearing a burqa for example, but who could still be 'bad' on the inside. They stress the fact that even though they are not observing purdah in the strict sense they can still be better Muslims than some of the non-working women.
Others play out the family sacrifice role. They portray themselves as women working to ensure the family’s well-being, whereas ‘purdasin’ village women are just ‘sitting idly’ at home. They label their work as ‘good’ and sitting idly at home as ‘bad’. At the same time they distance themselves from the image of ‘loose women’ who work outside the home and have affairs. They see themselves as women who have not forsaken ‘family values’. On the contrary, by emphasising their sacrifice for the family they actually reaffirm their ‘family’ identity. In this sense they represent themselves as ‘good’, ‘family-oriented’ women. They underline their immaculate sexual behaviour by depicting GK as a safe and secure place where their virtue is well protected. GK is described as the ‘purdah-safe’ place, where one does not ‘mix with bad men’. GK’s family atmosphere, in which the men in the organisation are all regarded as brothers, is stressed. Women working at GK do not necessarily ‘carry their purdah with them’ like Kabeer’s (1991) garment women, but they preserve their religious identity and try to marry it as far as possible with their worker’s identity. Work was described as wanted by Allah: ‘Allah does not want me to starve’.

For some women, however, GK’s ‘masculine’ work atmosphere and deliberate ruptures with standard family values clashed with their own unfulfilled desires and ‘feminine’ needs to create their own family. This was particularly the case for female staff members. Some had come to GK as young girls and ended up dedicating their whole life to the organisation so that they eventually became either too old or too ‘independent’ and missed the chance to get married. In this context one has to realise that for a GK woman to have a successful marriage also needs a certain type of man, who is prepared to marry an ‘emancipated’ woman i.e. a man who is willing to give up his position of authority and enter an egalitarian relationship with his wife.

Most women at GK have learned how to lead a self-dependent life. They are confident and proud and perfectly capable of living on their own, but some of them, nevertheless, still yearn for a ‘happy family’.

Shongita, the ex-GK driver, for example, has lived all her adult life as an independent woman. She came to GK when she was 15 and pregnant. Her husband had abandoned her because of unmet dowry demands. Now that she is
financially solvent and has made her own way in life he wants her back and she is considering getting back together with him. Even if she does reunite with her husband, she is not the type who would fall back into the classic ‘obedient’ wife role. What becomes clear in the following quotation, however, is how significant the family identity had still remained for her all this time as she is now missing a ‘happy family’ life:

I want to have a husband, because I am a woman and I didn't have time to gather experience from family life ... Life is nothing. I have worked, gone through all Bangladesh, seen the conditions of people and have mixed with many people. After observing and understanding everything I felt that our situation [her relation to her husband] is better than that of many others. So now we should concentrate on family ties, because our daughter is also growing up (Shongita, now driver at UNICEF, 30, abandoned).

8.3 The problem with empowerment

In the above section I have summarised my findings of both the institutional approach to empowerment applied by the development organisation GK and the practices of empowerment as experienced by the women with whom I had spoken. I have demonstrated that women's experiences with empowerment are not a straightforward process. In fact the process of empowerment can be contradictory. Contradictions, however, occur not only in women's practical experiences with empowerment, but are already ingrained within the theoretical concept of empowerment.

8.3.1 The paradox between empowerment and development intervention

I started this thesis with an overview of the existing empowerment literature in relation to development intervention. If one recalls, feminists defined empowerment as a process coming ‘from below’, which cannot be ‘given’ to women, which cannot be done ‘to’ or ‘for’ women, but which comes ‘from within’, which has to be ‘self-generated’ (Kabeer 1994, Nelson and Wright 1995, Rowlands 1998). As one can see from GK's example, however, development organisations often intervene in women's lives. Does the feminists' call for non-directive change
thus imply that external change agents become irrelevant in the process of women’s empowerment? Does this mean that women can only truly be empowered if they empower themselves without the interference of an outsider?

According to Freire (1972:42), whose concept of a liberating education is central to the feminist notion of empowerment, ‘no one liberates himself [sic] by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others’. In his model, however, educators do play a key role and NGOs obviously see themselves in such a role. Those working towards mobilising the poor, in particular, have based their principles around Freire’s theories - perhaps also because these invited them to occupy such a role:

... the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none ... educational projects [should therefore] be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them (Freire 1972:30-31).

Batliwala (1993:10) argues on similar lines that women in South Asia are... taught that it is someone else - not themselves - who must solve their problems or make their decisions ... Thus, external change agents are often necessary to initiate the process of empowerment.

For those who believe external change agents are relevant to women’s empowerment the subsequent question is how these can promote social change without imposing, without doing it ‘for’ women, but rather ‘with’ them. How can NGOs stimulate women to use their ‘power to’ to negotiate and transform those who have ‘power over’ (Nelson and Wright 1995)?

Rowlands (1998) advises NGOs to identify ‘areas for action’ that can enhance the empowerment process. This involves, for example, locating factors which encourage or inhibit women’s confidence building, sense of self and agency. It demands a closer understanding of women’s self-perception and their positioning within a wider context. NGOs need to find out whether the changes they or their donors have in mind match those desired by the women with whom they work. Overall Rowlands (1998:27) sees the role of a supporting organisation as that of an ally, where

[allies are not only supportive and in solidarity with you, but will also put their weight behind you in places where you need it,
The ideal image of NGOs is therefore that of ‘initiating’, ‘stimulating’ or ‘facilitating’ the process of empowerment. These terms are used quite often in connection with NGOs and empowerment, but does this mean that by simply applying such terms to NGOs they will automatically turn into non-directive change agents? What if NGOs are not as non-directive as the literature would like them to be? Can only non-directive change lead to women’s empowerment? Is the empowerment approach in development intervention not, then, a contradiction in terms?

In this thesis I have chosen the development organisation GK as a framework for studying women’s empowerment practices. Empowerment processes take place as illustrated in my empirical chapters. GK is not, however, a feminist organisation. It is not a non-directive NGO. On the contrary, it interferes into women’s lives on various levels, for example, by drawing them into the organisation for a long period and redefining women’s public and private spaces. The aim of breaking public-private divides, however, proves difficult within the prevailing cultural system, as autonomous women’s groups have not been established to date. The situation is rather one of redefining women’s spaces in terms of providing alternative ‘protective’ spaces to oppressive homes. The organisation then becomes a home away from home. The question that arises next is whether this new ‘public’ home was merely an extension of the domestic home where similar patriarchal patterns were reproduced or whether it had the potential of becoming a transitory counter-home where women could gather their strength and develop an oppositional force to their subordination. I believe that in a context where rural women do not yet have their own space for mobilising themselves they need to rely on the space an organisation like GK can offer them. Even if this space is a protective space and set within hierarchical structures that reflect the prevailing culture, it has still enabled some women to experience the world in a different way and establish the grounds for questioning the existing order. For some women the ‘organisational’ patriarch is a nicer one than the patriarch at home. Some women certainly prefer it to the domestic patriarch. Hence the empowerment approach in development intervention might not be such a contradiction in terms after all.
If we now assume that empowerment processes can take place to a certain extent in organisations, albeit hierarchical ones, we come to another complex issue within the empowerment literature: the translation of individual empowerment into collective empowerment.

8.3.2 The feminists’ call for collective action

In the context of development, while individual empowerment is one ingredient in achieving empowerment at the collective and institutional levels, concentration on individuals alone is not enough. Changes are needed in the collective abilities of individuals to take charge of identifying and meeting their own needs - as households, communities, organisations, institutions, and societies (Rowlands 1995:105-106).

Feminist empowerment theories call for collective action. In reality, however, collective action only takes place on a very small scale - that is if it takes place at all. As the above section pointed out, an individual person’s empowerment process is already extremely complicated and contradictory. How much more complex then must that of an entire group be!

In rural Bangladesh women are leaving their homes and going to work nowadays, but this decision is still a drastic one. In most cases women only take such drastic measures because they have to survive or because they can no longer cope with an oppressive situation at home. It tends to be the last option when no other alternative is left. Women are usually only prepared to risk societal disapproval when absolutely necessary. Absolute necessity is therefore the driving force behind women’s breach with cultural expectations of appropriate female behaviour.

Assertive behaviour - like talking back, making oneself heard, challenging oppressive groups and supporting others against dominant forces - is, on the other hand, not absolutely necessary for immediate survival. Women are prepared to trade off societal disapproval against an increased material well-being, but there is no particular reason why they should trade off the risk of
societal exclusion against empowerment and acts of solidarity. As one woman in GK said:

We ourselves are still unsettled - where is the time for others?

The women have already broken with tradition to some extent by leaving their homes, but there is a huge difference between a woman who leaves her home in order to survive and a woman who confidently talks back if provoked by a non-related male. The leap becomes even bigger when expecting an entire group of women overtly to resist power structures in their village. Why should these women risk losing their status by becoming politically involved at the local village level if this move does not bring them or their families immediate benefit?

One needs to keep the realities of low-income women in mind when searching for traces of collective action. Collective action as envisioned by some feminists might just not be the women's first choice, if it does not stem out of an urgent need. Collective action remains handicapped as long as women still have to solve their own problems. They are still settling their own lives and working towards ensuring the basic minimum necessities for themselves and their families. The women work so hard every day: where should they get the time and energy to engage in active struggle, when the benefits are not immediately visible?

I am not saying that women at GK were not interested in supporting others. As demonstrated in Chapter Six there is a lot of scope for solidarity at GK. The potential for the translation of individual empowerment into collective empowerment exists in GK on both the organisational and the national level. Lacking in GK's approach towards empowerment, however, is an emphasis on the local level, in other words an emphasis on strengthening women's groups in the villages.

Organisational level of empowerment:

In my empirical chapters I have described in detail how women have undergone personal change through their involvement at GK. The women at GK adopt an additional identity to their familial one. The other identity is related to new work responsibilities and the role the women have to fulfill as members of an organisation. They also experience a collective identity in GK. There is a sense
of togetherness and feeling of belonging and being respected in a group. GK is a place where women meet others with similar problems. As a group they can share similar sorrows. In the meetings and group discussions women develop a collective consciousness. They get used to debating various issues in small and bigger groups. In these occasions they have the possibility to work out problems as a group.

**National level of empowerment:**

GK stimulates individual women's awareness of their position in society, which has led to a collective identification with the women's cause. The organisation promotes a collective sense of agency when preparing for the marches at the International Women's Day. If one follows Friedmann's (1992) definition of collective action the GK women's participation in the women's marches could be called collective action. Friedmann (1992:33) defines collective action in terms of individuals' participation 'in politics on a personal basis', where individual voices 'merge with the many voices of larger political associations ...'.

However, the fact that women (from GK or any other NGO in Bangladesh) are participating in the national women's movement is not action taken on the women's own initiative. Their participation was organised by NGOs and they were expected to join the marches. I do not deny that their participation is an important event in their lives and that it stimulates reflection on equality issues, but it is not spontaneous action organised collectively by the women themselves. This lack of spontaneous collective action indicates the predicaments organisations like GK have to face. Rowlands describes empowerment as a 'desperately slow' approach:

> Most funding agencies are understandably preoccupied with showing results. Yet the work needed for raising levels of confidence and self-esteem among poor and marginalised people in such a way that will enhance their ability to take charge of their own needs is necessarily time-consuming (Rowlands 1995:105).

I did not see signs of large-scale visible collective action that went beyond women's participation in the national women's marches. Some feminists have a more heroic image of collective action than Friedmann (1992). Batliwala (1993:9), for example, dreams of women 'breaking free of the[ir] sense of inferiority' and
asserting their rights along with their ‘sisters’. To talk about collective action in this sense raises expectations of more dramatic actions that actually change power structures: groups of determined women preventing their husbands from alcohol consumption as happens occasionally in India, or women tying themselves to trees in order to protect their environment, or groups of women storming village councils to prevent a fatwa. Such long term changes in existing power structures on a village level are not yet in evidence.

Local level of empowerment:

What is in evidence on the local village level so far are individual strategic actions. I have observed and heard of many examples such as women teaching others how to read and write, finding work for others, giving advice on marital problems, sharing health and family planning information, stopping someone from being cheated, lecturing villagers on the advantages of educating girls, rejecting dowry practices and discussing equality issues with men at home and in the villages. These actions, however, are all on a very small scale.

The women at GK do not have an influence on local politics. Individually they challenge local figures of authority, but they are not organised as a group in their villages aiming to change existing power relations. In order to form a localized pressure group there obviously have to be more GK women in each village. This is one of the problems as GK’s approach to empowerment is not village-based, but draws women from different villages to the organisation. Many individual women at GK have developed leadership capacities. They have the necessary confidence and competence to gain respect from local elites. In other words the potential for collective empowerment on a local scale is there, if GK would form big enough women’s groups from selected villages. GK would then have to create possibilities for these groups to work together on activities relevant to the specific village. It would have to enable these women’s groups to take charge of their situations and act effectively as a group to influence village politics.

In this context one needs to remember, however, that GK is predominantly a health-oriented organisation. The vocational training programme for women has always been perceived by the organisation as an experiment and a prototype.
which could then be copied on a larger scale by other organisations or
government programmes. GK's claim was therefore never that of promoting
collective mobilisation in specific villages. The challenge therefore lies in applying
the insights and experiences individual women have made within GK more
broadly. The transformations women have experienced in GK have not led to
groundbreaking changes in existing power structures. They have to be
understood in a very subtle way. The changes do not happen suddenly but
develop over a long period of time. The process of empowerment women at GK
are experiencing is happening on a day to day basis. Each day forms and shapes
each particular woman in a different way. The most fascinating observation I
made when studying GK's experimental approach to women's empowerment was
the transformation of women's bodies.

8.3.3 Bringing the body into the empowerment debate

At the beginning of this thesis I have mentioned how the body has become the
object of recent academic discourses as well as popular interest. The body is
addressed from various angles. 'Medical', 'slender' and 'plastic' bodies, for
example, are the outcomes of rigid health and beauty regimes (Bordo 1993). New
means of telecommunications create 'technobodies' or 'virtual bodies' - bodies that
are now able to 'act at a distance' (Callard 1998, Pile and Thrift 1995: 7).
Feminist discourses centre around 'sexed bodies' in their deconstruction of the
'masculinist claims to knowledge' which allow white men - but not others - to
transcend their embodiment by perceiving their bodies as the containers of
consciousness (Longhurst 1995: 98). Recent feminist theories therefore challenge
these 'disembodied' concepts of reason, arguing that the mind is not separable
from the body:

... our dominant conceptions and ideals of reason have been
connected to bodies [and] have been expressions of bodily concerns
or needs and reflections of embodied ways of being.

(Alcoff 1996: 17)

Western philosophical and political binaries such as mind/body, sex/gender,
male/female are being contested (Grosz 1994, Longhurst 1995). One speaks of
'third bodies' and 'cyborg bodies', where the body takes on the characteristics of
a machine (Haraway 1991). Queer theories expand on 'hybrid bodies' (Bell et al. 1994, Callard 1998). 'Raced bodies' are the subject of analysis in postcolonial theories concerned with the relation between colonial and colonised bodies (Spivak 1985).

My approach towards the body on the other hand is to seek a better understanding of women's embodied experiences of empowerment in the context of Bangladesh. The fact that women are experiencing a new body consciousness through their involvement in GK is one of the most exciting parts of their empowerment process, but GK itself has not given this aspect adequate attention.

I believe organisations like GK should invest more thought and effort into ways of encouraging this development of women's new body consciousness. They should tune down the focus on productive issues by lessening women's work pressure and ensure adequate leisure space for women to engage in 'adda' and networking with others. In the case of GK this is particularly important for those women who do not live in the GK compounds and therefore have fewer opportunities to engage with the other women during leisure time. Given the context of Bangladesh, where cultural norms of appropriate female behaviour restrict women's embodied empowerment, I therefore argue that women need a forum and a space where they can 'practise' their bodily expressions.

My findings suggest that bodily expression is important for women: it is important to keep eye contact when speaking to others; it is important to be able to raise their voices; it is important to laugh out loudly whenever they feel like it; it is important to move around with a confident stride; it is important to get in contact with other women. GK hence becomes a body for the women, a 'contested' and 'protected' body, but nevertheless a necessary body that gives women a channel to express themselves by providing them with a space of their own, a space away from village surveillance, away from home.

For any broader impact at the village level, in other words an impact of women's embodied empowerment that would then go beyond the GK boundaries, long-term concepts need to be developed for strengthening women's bodily presence
in their communities. Such an approach, however, is beyond the capacity of a single organisation. As I have shown in my thesis individual GK women have redefined their roles in their villages (i.e. being perceived as medical women, being asked for advice), but on other occasions they are still struggling in negotiating their multiple identities with the dominant systems of belief. The women do not necessarily hide their newly discovered ‘masculinised’ bodies when confronted with their village communities, but defend, modify and ‘feminise’ them (using feminine dress, modest and less provocative behaviour in the village etc).

What lessons, then, can be learned from GK’s approach towards women’s empowerment? Is it viable to train women in non-traditional areas in Bangladesh? Although I am aware of general criticism of GK’s approach for not being replicable beyond its own boundaries I still believe that GK has had a major impact on three levels: the macro, meso and micro scale.

On the macro-scale GK influences the national and international perception of Bangladeshi women. It has an important symbolic meaning as it offers the world alternative images to still-prevalent notions of invisible, victimised and powerless Bangladeshi women. On the meso-scale, GK women have made themselves noticed in their local environment and have begun to redefine their roles and identities in their households and communities. Lastly GK’s approach of training women in ‘masculine’ fields has had an enormous effect on the women themselves. They might not have established themselves yet as professional carpenters or welders in their communities, but their confidence and self-esteem have grown; they have become more assertive, believing in their own changes, and have transformed their body management.

Through their bodily expressions of empowerment GK women are consciously and overtly resisting cultural norms of appropriate behaviour. I therefore find it timely and crucial to include an analysis of the body in the gender and development discourse. The implication of this must be to achieve a deeper understanding of how development intervention, directed towards women’s empowerment, affects women’s bodies and to use this as a basis for strategic gender-sensitive development policy. I agree with Rowlands who argues that
In order to ‘capture’ the degree of effectiveness of the empowerment approach, ‘performance indicators’ of empowerment need to be developed. The fact that ... the women learned to read will not communicate the process through which that was achieved. Qualitative indicators will be an essential, significant part of evaluation ... (Rowlands 1998:29).

The outcome of my investigation into women’s empowerment experiences strongly encourages the incorporation of indicators of embodied empowerment in such an evaluation. Such indicators could be, for example, those listed in Figure 8.5.

8.4 Future research

Changes are happening in Bangladesh and women are actively experiencing these, albeit on different levels. In this thesis my focus has been on the experiences of women involved in the NGO GK. It would be interesting to compare these experiences with those of other groups of women going through change in a different context. Credit programmes claim to have ‘empowered’ women and to play a key role in current development debates in Bangladesh and elsewhere. What do credit beneficiaries themselves think of this? It has also been suggested that garment factories hold the potential to change and ‘empower’ women on a much broader scale than a single NGO ever could. Comparing these divergent groups of women, all of whom undergo change in different ways, would provide useful insights into the current empowerment debate. The indicators of change women experienced at GK which I have listed above could be applied as a tool for comparison.

Another issue I would like to raise are the roles men play in NGO programmes. When speaking of redefining gender roles, organisations often forget to address men in this context. GK is no exception. I am aware of the fact that GK was founded at a time where women-centric organisations were the norm, but time has moved on and my understanding of the term ‘gender’ implies the involvement of both women and men. In these rapidly changing times women have already proven to be flexible enough to adapt to new socio-economic
conditions and the women at GK demonstrate just that; but what about their men? My interviews with married women at GK did not give me enough insight into the men's process of reacting and adjusting to their wives' new lifestyles and the changing conditions in Bangladesh. When asked how their husbands/fathers reacted to the women's changing lifestyles they referred to their guardians' satisfaction with the extra income, their increased respect for the women and the fact that more joint decisions were being taken in the household. What they did not talk about, however, was whether their husbands' lifestyles had changed too. In my interviews with some of the women's husbands I realised that they were not interested in elaborating on this point either. It appeared as if they did not give the whole issue that much importance. As my understanding of empowerment is that it is a process that affects both men and women I find this a subject worth pursuing in future research. I believe development organisations with an interest in empowerment need to reassess their goals by incorporating men into their programmes. I do not only mean including men as male workers. What I mean is, for example, inviting women's husbands, fathers, village elders and even religious leaders to participate in some of their programmes.

In short, men have not been adequately involved in empowerment debates. In order to become truly gender-sensitive and not remain women-centric GAD programmes and policies need to give this issue more attention. How do men react to the fact that they are losing their position as breadwinners in their families? How do they compensate for this loss? More in-depth research needs to be done on intra-family relationships and the subtle ways changes are negotiated in the families. Women might be experiencing change when entering organisations like GK, but what do their husbands think of this change? Are they changing with their wives? Are they learning from them and participating in these changes or do they feel threatened and undermined by their wives' increased independence? How are unmarried women who engage in NGO programmes perceived by potential suitors? Does their status in the marriage market rise due to their level of education and work skills or are men scared of women who are too 'emancipated'? What do men think of these women's 'virtues' and sexual propriety?

This leads me to another subject I find particularly fascinating, and which is
currently non-existent in the Bangladesh literature: an in-depth understanding of women’s attitudes towards their sexualities. Are women sexually repressed in the current context of Bangladesh or is that just a product of the Western imagination? Does women’s controlled sexuality in public also imply controlled sexuality in private? Can women exert mechanisms of power and control through their sexuality? Does women’s involvement with organisations like GK, for example, influence their sexual behaviour and identity in any way and if so, how? Does increased networking with other women have an influence? Does women’s interaction with non-related men change their sexual behaviour towards men? Do women express their sexualities more openly and confidently or does their involvement in masculine spaces intimidate them (e.g. fear of being sexually harassed or raped)? Or does it intimidate men (e.g. fear of not being able to maintain their position of dominance)? How do women’s sexual behaviours and powers differ according to class, age and place?

In this thesis I have argued that women at GK were going through a process of embodied empowerment. An integral part of such bodily empowerment surely must include their sexual empowerment, which is a topic I have only managed to discuss on a very limited scale. In order to talk in-depth about changes in people’s sexual behaviour with both women and men in a rural Bangladeshi context would have required a far lengthier stay in Bangladesh and a more intimate relationship with the respondents. However, to follow up this subject in future research would provide useful insights into a deeper understanding of the different shades of women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. Why, for example, do women living in the chars (islands formed by sediment deposits), as I have been told, behave in a far more open and expressive way towards men and strangers than those who live on the mainland? Women’s behaviour in the mainland seems to be more restricted. Why is this so? Has it to do with the isolated location of the chars islands and the fact that women thus live far away from the village surveillance of their original homes? It would be very interesting to find out how women’s (and men’s) sexual behaviour patterns change according to the places and circumstances in which they live. Assuming that GK women are experiencing embodied empowerment through their engagement with GK, does that imply that they are also experiencing sexual empowerment? How does their sexual behaviour differ from that of the char women, who have never been in
touch with an external change agent like GK, but who are said to be nevertheless very aware of their bodies?

8.5 Conclusion

Overall this thesis sets out to encourage future research to place a stronger emphasis on women's practical experiences of empowerment. I find this important as my case study has brought up significant contradictions between empowerment theories and the actual empowerment practices of an organisation and the women involved in it. I have argued that although GK has clear internal hierarchical structures, women experience empowerment through their engagement with GK. This contradicts the literature's portrayal of empowerment as being something that must always come 'from below'. Furthermore GK's approach to empowerment is unusual in that it creates separate spaces for women. In other words, women are taken out of the village 'surveillance' and brought into the realm of the organisation. For many women GK has thus become an 'alternative domestic space'. In my empirical chapters I have demonstrated how much women have changed their behaviour since leaving the villages behind. Could they have changed as much without ever leaving the villages? I do not think they could have done so. However, by removing women from their villages GK has undermined the potential for local collective action. The appropriate place for such action tends to be the village level. Since GK is not placing enough emphasis on encouraging collective empowerment at the village level it is not fulfilling the feminists' demand for collective action, which is defined as the ultimate element within the process of empowerment.

In this thesis, however, I have argued that one needs to take a step back if one wants to understand how empowerment eventually takes place. The key to this question are the women themselves. One needs to understand how these women experience empowerment on a day-to-day basis. I believe that GK has succeeded in stimulating women into wanting to change their attitude and behaviour both towards themselves as well as towards others. This can be seen most clearly in women's new bodily comportment. The body, as I have demonstrated in this thesis, hence becomes an area of research which should no longer be neglected
within empowerment debates as it can become a significant tool for effective policy making in the field of gender and development.

Notes

1. Goetz (1996a) made similar observations at BRAC.


### APPENDIX ONE: BASIC PROFILE OF CORE INTERVIEWEES

(names have been changed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Place of residence</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Occupational status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simeen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>unmarried</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>handicrafts</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurjahan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>printing press</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasmun</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>shoe-maker</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahera</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>pump operator</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>unmarried</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>pump operator</td>
<td>GK trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaleda</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>bakery</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foslema</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>carpenter</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shongita</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>driver</td>
<td>UNICEF employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merjan</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>jute-plastic (GK)</td>
<td>GK trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahmuda</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>unmarried</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>security post</td>
<td>GK trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassina</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>handicrafts</td>
<td>manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinu</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>jute-plastic firm (Dhaka)</td>
<td>employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamina</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>jute-plastic firm (Dhaka)</td>
<td>employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kudera</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>shop owner</td>
<td>self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zohra</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>printing press</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarina</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>printing press</td>
<td>GK trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrun</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>machine operator</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rizia</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>widow</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>welder</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arifa</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>unmarried</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>welder</td>
<td>GK trainee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanufa</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>carpenter</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majilla</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>ex-GK carpenter, now (sewing) machine operator</td>
<td>EPZ employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rahima</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>carpenter</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bina</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>construction worker</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimosa</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>jute-plastic (GK)</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najma</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>laundry (GK)</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selina</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>separated</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>boiler operator</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>baker</td>
<td>GK drop-out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parvin</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>own laundry</td>
<td>self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>widow</td>
<td>not in GK</td>
<td>own laundry</td>
<td>self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mubina</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>abandoned</td>
<td>in GK</td>
<td>driver</td>
<td>GK employee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX TWO: INTERVIEW THEMES

1. WORK AT GK
   - Reasons for working at GK
   - How the women and their family members value their work at GK
   - Work expectations
   - Reactions of family members
   - Women's attitude to the type of work they perform at GK
   - Changed perception of themselves since working at GK
   - Description of what women feel and experience when performing certain work activities at GK

2. INCOME
   - Income expenditure pattern/changes since working in GK
   - Impact of women's income earning activity on household arrangements
   - Difference in income spending between the women and their spouses
   - Impact of women's income earning activity on relationship between women and their spouses/other family members
   - Income control and decision-making
   - Women's contribution to family income

3. FUTURE PLANS
   - Plans to work outside GK, open own business, buy land
   - Future dreams for themselves, their families
   - Aspirations for their children (in particular daughters)

4. CHANGES
   - Differences between the women's and their mothers' lives
   - Plans to change own lifestyles
   - Difference in women's relationship to their spouses since working in GK
   - Difference in women's relationship to their spouses compared to that of their parents
   - Changes for women's children (in particular their daughters)
   - Thoughts on general changes in Bangladesh
   - Thoughts on changing role of women in Bangladesh
   - Difference in talking about own problems compared to women's mothers' situation

5. STATUS
   - Feeling of having more control of their lives since working at GK
   - Participation in after-work activities
   - Perception of increased independence and making own decisions
   - Perception of women's status in their families, in their communities
   - Women's mobility in their villages
6. **Purdah**

- Purdah practices and meanings
- Attitude towards women practising strict purdah
- Difference between women's lifestyle and that of women practising strict purdah
- Difference in women's behaviour (in workplace - in their communities)
- Negotiating work and religious identities
- Attitude towards mixing with non-relatives (men) in GK
- Reaction to objections of religious leaders to women working
- Maintaining sexual propriety

7. **Marriage**

a. Married women

- Changes in family life
- Reaction of husbands to women performing 'men's work'
- Conflict over women's new roles
- Restrictions from husband's side
- Power relations in the household
- Double burden
- Division of household work
- Conflict over budget
- Decision-making in the household
- Expectations of women on family/marriage life
- Relationship between the spouses
- What do couples talk about?
- Thoughts on how the ideal husband should be
- Women's wishes

b. Unmarried women

- Marriage expectations
- Arranged marriage or own choice
- Time of marriage
- Do women feel they have better marriage options due to new skills?
- Pressure from family/community on women getting married and potential refusal from women's side

c. Female-headed households

- Reasons for abandonment
- Changes in women's life since being abandoned
- Who supported women after abandonment?
- Women's survival mechanisms
- Women's attitude to GK (fallback position)
8. CHILDREN
- Time spent with children
- Space for children in GK
- Children's education (equal education?) and future plans
- Attitude to their daughters and work
- Changes in children's upbringing

9. PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES
- Feelings of pride, responsibility etc due to new skills
- Plans/wishes to learn other skills
- Women's perception of their roles in their communities
- Times in women's lives when they wanted to be born as a man
- Differences between men and women (treatment in society, opportunities etc)
- Perception on men's reaction to women's increased participation in the labour market (in the context of men losing the role of a breadwinner)
- Perception towards performing in 'men's work', wearing 'men's clothes'
- Thoughts on their learning process at GK

10. FRIENDSHIP AND SOLIDARITY
- Friends in GK and in their communities
- How do women value the possibility of meeting other women in GK?
- Role of 'adda' sessions at GK
- What do women talk about in GK?
- Whom do women go to in times of crisis?
- With whom do women discuss personal problems?
- Do women need their own spaces?
- Feeling of strength within a group?
- Feeling towards the other people in GK
- Feeling towards flood victims
- Thoughts on what women would want to change if they were to speak to political leaders
- Reaction of women towards violence against women
- Attitude towards supporting other women in need

11. COMMUNITY
- Women's perception of village life
- Women's role in their communities (changes)
- Reaction of villagers to women working at GK
- Perception of own capacity to protest, 'talk back'
- Relationship towards other women in their communities (changes)
- Difference between own lifestyle and that of women living in villages (not engaged in formal work)
- Women's impact on other women in their villages
- Women's political participation in their villages
- Women's changed appearance in their communities
APPENDIX THREE: QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire Nr. | Date: | Hour:
--- | --- | ---
NAME:

1. RESIDENCE
GK or village (name)

2. MIGRATION: Home village or moved to Savar thana, if so when?

3. ECONOMIC PROFILE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>INCOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Has husband been employed regularly since you work at NK?

4. When will training finish and what do you do then?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>stay</th>
<th>leave</th>
<th>work outside</th>
<th>don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5. EMPLOYMENT
a. Who took decision for you to come to GK?
b. When did you start training? When employment?
   - Which workshop:
c. Why did you join GK?
d. How did you get the job? Through which information?
e. Objections from family/husband? Which?

6. Previous work experience (much detail) if not - housework?
7. INCOME EXPENDITURE - What happens to income?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>you keep it</th>
<th>husband/father</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Who makes decisions in your family?
Who decides for what income is spent? (some you - some husband/father)
How do you spend it? For what? How much? per day - per week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rent</th>
<th>food</th>
<th>children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you have a bank account? Did you ever try to have one? If not, do you want to have one?
What do you do with personal money?
- sari
- jewellery
- household goods
- other

8. Housework:

Do you work at home (bari work):
if not who does?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>activities</th>
<th>foodprepar.</th>
<th>cooking</th>
<th>cleaning</th>
<th>washing</th>
<th>childcare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. children going to school/child care at NK
who looks after the others?
10. contact to drop-outs or women who used to work for GK (address)

11. Can I come back to you for further questions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>CODES</th>
<th>BEFORE GK</th>
<th>AFTER GK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Marital status</td>
<td>married 1 unmarried 2 widow 3 divorced 4 abandoned 5 separated 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Economic status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. family income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Land</td>
<td>no land 1 under one decimal 2 over one decimal 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Assets</td>
<td>cow 1 goat 2 chicken 3 duck 4 television 5 radio 6 sewing machine 7 other 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Housing</td>
<td>what kind of house (tin roof, wood, with electricity, gas, water)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Food</td>
<td>per day how often, what</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Housework and cooking</td>
<td>who cooks, who does housework and child care?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hours spent for</td>
<td>A. sleeping  B. housework  C. pay work  D. leisure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Health</td>
<td>eye 1 headache 2 cough/fever 3 weakness 4 stomach upset 5 jaundice 6 urine 7 other 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Friends</td>
<td>more or less how many</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GLOSSARY

adda to chat/gossip
amar my
apa sister
bhape to discuss
bahi home, homestead, a courtyard surrounded by the houses of close kin
bazaar market
bhai brother
bidesh abroad
bideshi stranger/foreigner
bigha approximately one third of an acre, 30 decimals
bhodrolok a refined, cultured, educated person
bhoor bhasha language of the bhodrolok, pure Bengali
borobhai big brother
burqa cloak covering the entire body, including a hood for the head and flap to cover face, worn by women going outside to keep strict purdah
char an island formed by sediment deposits
chin porichit, millmohabbot strong affection for someone
dekha to see
dhormo moral order of society
dosher mukh many people (lit.: ten faces)
fatwa declaration of a decision by an Islamic religious leader
gee na strong no
Gonomess Gonoshasthaya Kendra’s dining hall
imam Islamic priest
lagga-sharam shame, embarrassment
kalemas main precepts of Islam
kan dia na to ignore (lit.: to not give an ear to)
khas land government-owned land
kharab nojor  bad intentions (lit.: bad eyes)
korte pare  to be able to do
madrassa  religious school
mansamman  preserving moral values
manshi mondo koy  people will speak badly
mastaans  thugs
messing  co-habiting in a hostel
mota manush  well established person (lit.: big person)
muezzin  priest calling for prayers
nakshi kantha  sewing and embroidery work (blankets)
namaz  prayers
nari  woman
notun bou  newly married wife
pani  water
para  neighbourhood, section of a village
proshikon  training
purdah  seclusion of women from outsiders
purdahsin  women following strict version of purdah
raptani  Export Processing Zone
rickshaw  small two-wheeled passenger vehicle drawn by one man
roza  fasting
shalish  village arbitration council attended only by men
salvar kameez  traditional Islamic dress including trousers, tunic and headscarf (in Bangladesh worn particularly by young unmarried women)
shamittee  village organisation
sari  dress worn by adult women
shashur bari  home of the father-in-law
shidanto  choice
shikito poribesh  educational environment
shobai bole  everybody says
shobai kore  everybody does
shobi  everything
shomaj  community council
shorir  body
shukh  happy
sooras  Quranic verses
tempo  larger version of a motorized rickshaw
thana  subdivision (lit.: police station)
tikhana  postal address
tEEP  spot worn by Hindu women to indicate their marital status
ustad  Sir (respectful way of addressing a teacher)
worna  cotton headscarf
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAWORD Association of African Women for Research and Development
ADAB Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh
ARTEP Asian Regional Programme for Employment Promotion
BARD Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development
BIDS Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BRAC Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BRAC/RED Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee/Research and Evaluation Department
CDR Centre for Development Research
CUSO Canadian University Service Overseas
DANIDA Danish International Development Authority
DAWN Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
EPZ Export Processing Zone
EZE Evangelisches Zentrum fuer Entwicklung
(German Evangelical Centre for Development)
FAO Food and Agriculture Organisation
FFHC/AD Freedom from Hunger Campaign/Action for Development
FINRRAGE Feminist International Network for Resistance against Reproductive and Genetic Engineering
GAD Gender and Development
GK Gonoshasthaya Kendra
GNP Gross National Product
GPL Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals Limited
GSS Gono Shahajya Shangstha
IDS Institute of Development Studies
ILO International Labour Organisation
NGO Non Governmental Organisation
NORAD Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NOVIB  Netherlands Organisation for International Development Cooperation
ODI  Overseas Development Institute
OPEC  Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
SAARC  South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SIDA  Swedish International Development Authority
SOW  Subordination of Women
UK  United Kingdom
UN  United Nations
UNDP  United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR  United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF  United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM  United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNRISD  United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US  United States
USAID  United States Agency for International Development
WAD  Women and Development
WID  Women in Development
WFP  World Food Programme
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