UCLA
Critical Planning

Title

A Forgotten Dimension: The Significance of Power Dynamics in Assessing Female Employment and Empowerment in Urban Bangladesh

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2x95d4r2

Journal

Critical Planning, 21(1)

Authors

Abrams, Carolyn
Luna, Ana

Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/CP8211024789

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

A Forgotten Dimension

The Significance of Power Dynamics in Assessing Female Employment and Empowerment in Urban Bangladesh

Carolyn Abrams & Ana Luna, MURP
University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract: Through the lens of female formal employment, this paper aims to highlight the complex lives of female garment factory workers in urban Bangladesh and subsequently challenge the theoretical foundations of current policies that seek to empower them. Based on the assumption that employment guarantees empowerment, we identify the significant power imbalance that exists between men and women at all levels of Bangladeshi society. In doing so, this paper provides a more complex understanding of how socio-cultural structures significantly impact women's experience of space, and ultimately provides practical

and theoretical recommendations to help inform effective policy development.

Through the lens of female formal employment, this paper aims to highlight the complex[1] lives of female garment factory workers in urban Bangladesh, and subsequently challenge the theoretical foundations of current policies that seek to "empower" them. In this regard, it is important to note the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that accompany the idea of empowerment throughout disciplines, movements, and social contexts. It is this variability that makes empowerment difficult to measure and hard to predict. In an effort to create a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of what constitutes empowerment, we begin with the idea that female empowerment removes the social, political, and economic limitations placed on women, and ultimately strengthens their ability to exercise power over their own lives. With the understanding that this concept changes depending on the specific context of development, the key component in this effort is maintaining a critical analysis of what empowerment means. Keeping this in mind, our paper provides a more complex understanding of how socio-cultural structures significantly impact the ability of policies to elevate the status of women. Following our analysis of development frameworks and their limited ability to capture women's experiences, this paper provides a set of indicators that can be used to inform a more accurate understanding and analysis of female empowerment. These indicators acknowledge the risks and vulnerabilities experienced by women, draw attention to the gendered power imbalances that exist, and challenge the assumption that employment guarantees empowerment.

---

[1] We use complex to refer to the historical, cultural, economic, political, and spatial components that influence women's experiences.

In the developing world, programs focused on gender did not materialize until the 1970s, following the "first decade of development" when women and gender issues were typically neglected and misunderstood (Kabeer 1994). During this time, women were conceptualized in limited capacities (e.g., housewives, caregivers, dependents, mothers, etc.) and the majority of the development agenda emphasized poverty as the main indicator of social disparity (Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007). Over the past thirty to forty years, major shifts in development work have taken place, and today, gender is commonly integrated into programming and policy development (Ibid.). Although this shift has allowed for a re-conceptualization of women that extends beyond previously limited identities, current development frameworks and assumptions remain simplistic and problematic (Van Santen 2009; Buvinic 1983).

At the same time, significant changes have taken place within the global economy. With the increased flexibility of capitalism emerging in the 1970s, industries began to reorganize and adopt practices of subcontracting, outsourcing, and creating multiple production sites (Storper 1997). This vertically disintegrated production process and social division of labor has created a major shift in the urban landscape that we observe (Soja 2000). These new dynamics of labor market formation are propelling the global economy, and thereby provide spatial, political, and economic context as we examine female workforce participation (Alam, Sattar, and Chaudhury 2010; Salway, Jesmin, and Rhman 2005; Amin 1998).

In the context of South Asia, global economic restructuring has led to increased specialization and clusters of production. A prime example is the garment factory industry in the urban region of Dhaka, which currently serves as Bangladesh's largest export sector. This particular industry has experienced significant gender shifts in labor participation, with 48% of the workforce now comprised of women (Amin 1998; Kabeer 1994). As similar changes take place at the regional level, Bangladesh provides an ideal point of analysis for understanding the social and economic phenomena taking place on a global scale.

As women move from informal to formal sectors of production, development experts and policymakers conclude that working women are empowered (Ibid.). However, these assumptions do not reflect the reality of women's lived experiences, and in fact, critical scholars and practitioners continue to note high levels of female vulnerability and risk within urban production spaces, such as home, work, and public space (Ibid.). Therefore, while empowerment policies predict an elevation in women's status, these policies, upon further examination, fail to recognize the fundamental drivers of gender inequality. Through an analysis of women's spatial experiences in the household, in public, and in the workplace, this paper aims to highlight the complexity of gendered power relationships and ultimately provides recommendations to inform effective policy development that acknowledges the realities of true female empowerment.

Limitations of Development and Policy

Western Models Fail to Capture the Household Reality

For over a decade, the impact of formal employment on women's household and societal status (Buvinic 1989; Duveen and Lloyd 1990; Sharma 1986; Standing 1991; Salway et al. 2005) remains a key topic of interest for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. The concept of formal employment leading to empowerment is not a new construct. Yet, in recent years, the causal statement that formal employment guarantees empowerment (or gender equality) has emerged as a key assumption used by policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars today. It is therefore through the use of flawed household-level models and limited development frameworks that problematic assumptions about empowerment remain. Within this section, we demonstrate how oversimplified household models of the past continue to reinforce and influence models and approaches of today. Additionally, development approaches rooted in researcher bias lead to policy frameworks that ultimately fail to encapsulate women's interactions and experiences.[2]

Historically a highly contentious issue, the applicability and limitations of using theoretical modeling to predict, indicate, and frame household behavior have been frequently voiced (Salway et al. 2005; Folbre 1986; Cornwall et al. 2007). Many critics of modeling take the positive view (Harvey 1969), believing that modeling exists as a reductive tool that should only be used to frame unchanging and replicable phenomenon (Ibid.). Other critiques highlight researcher-derived shortcomings, which continue to manifest today.[3] In 1986, Folbre, in "Heart and Spades: Paradigms of Household Economics," noted the powerful effect of researchers' pre-existing expectations and assumptions (Folbre 1986; Young, Wolkowitz, and McCullagh 1984). Arguing that "even the most scientific disciplines are drawn from 'un-testable circular assumptions,'" Folbre (1986, 246) emphasized the significant influence that researcher bias has on the expectations, perceptions, and limitations of economic theory.

According to Folbre and others, the most popular paradigm in household modeling is the "altruistic" paradigm. Model variations derived from this paradigm typically view households as cooperative environments, where the male head of household acts in the best interest of the family unit (Folbre 1986; Salway et al. 2005). Such assumptions reinforce neoclassical economists' view of "the market" as an "equalizer" (Folbre 1986; Salway et al. 2005; Amin 1997). Noting widespread critiques that question how the altruistic model could explain un-altruistic household anomalies, neoclassical economists and scholars rationalize characteristics like selfishness through "joint utility" functions (Amin 1997; Folbre 1986). Through this approach, children are identified within the household as "free riders," while the male power holder is the altruist (Standing 1991; Folbre 1986). In this context, issues such as selfishness, working women, and marital conflict are kept within household boundaries. Critiques of this paradigm concede that, while neoclassical economists and scholars attempt to reason through anomalies, the altruistic model ultimately fails to address issues that exist in households but can't be explained by "the market."[4] Therefore, rather than engaging with the role of gender inequality, domination, alienation, or tension

---

[2] In the workplace, household, and urban landscape.

[3] Opponents of modeling in reading.

[4] Critique of neoclassical household models.

within the household, traditional household modeling historically dismisses such dimensions as "outliers."

Noting the failure of the neoclassical altruistic paradigm to incorporate issues of politics and struggle, the Marxist tradition explains household dynamics by emphasizing conflict, exploitation, and tension (Hartman 1979). While the Marxist perspective incorporates overlooked characteristics posed by the altruistic model, the Marxist tradition tends to oversimplify experiences by attributing struggles and conflict to class divisions (Ferguson 1979). In this sense, the Marxist paradigm, like the neoclassical one, does not view family members as individuals (with their own preferences and relations) and fails to address gender inequality and power structures within the household (Hartman 1979; Cornwall et al. 2007). Both the Marxist and neoclassical perspectives on household interactions struggle to address real-life household dynamics, including increases in female income, shifting power dynamics, health, and well-being within the family unit (Whitehead and Kabeer 2001; Kabeer 1994). Although these were prominent paradigms in the late 1980s, both approaches failed to encompass and emphasize intra-household dynamics, with particular attention to gender inequality.

Both Marxist and neoclassical models sought to explain household-level dynamics and impacts on productivity, yet they struggled to view households as units that contain uneven power relations and individual preferences. Constrained by their own disciplines,[5] the perceptions of Marxist and neoclassical economists "impacted what they hoped for, and what they saw" (Folbre 1986; Young et al. 1984). Limited by methodological bias, both paradigms overemphasize the capital market and fail to root their understandings of households in the context of the developing world, where power, politics, inequality and cooperation meld together and cut traditional economic boundaries. This failure to recognize and acknowledge developing contexts and culture due to researcher bias continued well into the 1990s, and has manifested in development approaches today.

Fundamental Drivers of Inequality

Noting the marginalization of women in the developing world, donors and practitioners over the last decade have pushed to integrate women into development. According to Cornwall and Whitehead, development policy began to incorporate gender dimensions into programming initiatives following external pressure (Cornwall et al. 2007; Whitehead and Kabeer 2001). Emphasizing inequalities and efficacy issues in public space, the household, and the workforce, numerous organizations shifted their focus to women's issues.[6] Additionally, during this time, large-scale data shattered the image of the "altruistic household," demonstrating that unearned income controlled by women is associated with large-scale improvements in child health and nutrition (Thomas 1990); greater fertility reduction (Schultz 1981); increased shares of household budgets allocated to health, education, and housing (Thomas 1993); increased equity regarding gender preference in children; and a greater probability that children will attend school and receive medical attention (Cornwall et al. 2007). Until this time, supporters of the altruistic paradigm dismissed prior observations and findings as anecdotal or feminine (Folbre 1986). Thus, noting major shifts in women's

---

[5] Neoclassical theorists primarily seeing cooperation, and Marxists emphasizing conflict.

[6] CARE, World Bank, UN

roles in the developing world (particularly regarding workforce participation), development experts and policymakers focused on the impact of formal employment on women's empowerment.[7] While such initiatives mark a significant shift in development policy and planning by attempting to incorporate women into development, approaches and models continue to reinforce gender stereotypes derived from historically flawed paradigms, and most findings remain based on Western history and processes.

Widespread political and academic initiatives that incorporate women's issues may have stemmed from well-meaning intentions, but poor definitions of "equality," "equity," "participation," and "empowerment" remain embedded in development policy and have led to gender generalizations, myths, and stereotypes. For instance, in an effort to rally support for women's issues, organizations and practitioners "popularize simplistic labels," (Van Santen 2009, 3) thus reinforcing misrepresentations of gender, such as: "women are less corrupt than men...women [are] more concerned with the environment...[and] women are inherently peaceful" (Ibid., 3). Simplistic slogans and the existence of myths not only create frustrations and disillusionment, but also lead to confusion and a lack of focus when it comes to action (Gujit and Kaul Shah 1998). By generalizing the experiences of individuals, it is commonplace for policymakers and practitioners to disregard the role of gender inequality, social hierarchy, and discrimination (Kabeer 1994). Furthermore, by reinforcing key asymmetries in gender power dynamics, policies and programs ignore the various contexts, roles, and positions in which women interact. According to critics of gender generalization, failure to define key concepts, conditions, or characteristics of living in fact ignores the context specific nature of gender relations (Cornwall et al. 2007; Kabeer 1994). Nonetheless, in an effort to rally support, policymakers and practitioners argue that slogans and oversimplification are necessary for getting ideas institutionalized. Additionally, multilateral entities,[8] nongovernmental organizations,[9] and humanitarian aid groups[10] play significant roles in defining terms of development, allocating funds, and identifying agendas. Thus, development work is often constrained by the conventions and priorities of "big players in mainstream development" (Van Santen 2009, 2). Therefore, like the household models of the past, development experts sideline complex context-specific issues like gender inequality, social hierarchy, and discrimination. In this way, programs focused on gender in the developing world remain constrained by Western perceptions and assumptions.

Ultimately, in an effort to integrate gender into development, politicians and practitioners rely on flawed models of the past, Western processes, and gender stereotypes to assess women's status in the developing world. Development frameworks reflect the Euro-centered processes of industrial capitalism and female emancipation (Standing 1991). Deriving from models of the past, practitioners and policymakers predicted that equality for women would be reached through their participation in the market as equal consumers and contributors (Standing 1991; Amin et al. 1997). Furthermore, models rest on assumptions about women's primary commitments to families and dependence on male "breadwinners." From these development assumptions, women are predicted to become equal consumers and equal participants within the household (following formalized employment). Such assumptions fail to acknowledge that processes of industrial capitalism are different in today's

---

[7] In the household and public domain.

[8] World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank, United Nations

[9] Gates Foundation, Hewlett Packard, DFID, RAND

[10] CARE, Oxfam, World Vision, Red Cross

global economy. Additionally, models of the past presume that equal social and economic participation is guaranteed, like in western societies. Most importantly, they also assume that women enter the labor force, like men do, devoid of household constraints or responsibilities. However, within the context of the developing world, and more specifically Bangladesh, highly contextual cultural traditions, politics, and economic manifestations impact the experience and status of working women.

Development and Policy Limitations Drive Inequality

Comparing On-the-Ground Reality with Theoretical Frameworks and Policy

Noting the power imbalance between men and women in urban Bangladesh, and the presumed relationship between female empowerment and employment, this section aims to explore the spatial experiences of working women and compare these realities with the theoretical foundations previously discussed. Specifically, this section explores the connection between Bangladeshi women's economic and socio-cultural subordination (within the context of urban Dhaka) and their disadvantages within the garment factory labor force.

Recognizing the household as a site for economic processes and political struggle, Folbre (1986) has observed and emphasized structural influences on bargaining power, distribution of resources, and division of responsibilities. Specifically within the context of Bangladesh, cultural subordination is a key component of women's household experience. As a popular topic of study in Bangladesh, risk and vulnerability derived from household inequality are well documented and discussed in social scientist literature (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar 1979; Folbre 1986). Despite data that documents this ongoing reality, altruistic models maintain that "women and children volunteer, relinquish rest, education, and food" for the benefit of the family unit (Standing 1991). Juxtaposed against the reality that women in Bangladesh frequently lack economic power, scholars highlight the limitations of women's economic self-interest and the impacts of these limitations on women's spatial experiences.

Exploring the real-life limitations of Bangladeshi economics, women frequently act contrary to "altruist" assumptions. Indeed, according to scholars, women frequently take on head-of-household responsibilities, challenging the neoclassical paradigms that traditionally view men as "controllers" of the family unit (Hart 1997). The emergence of data that shows women as responsible heads of households, does not propose that women replace men within the altruistic unitary model. Rather, the emergence of women as significant contributors and complex actors highlights the issue that altruistic models fail to explore the drivers of household-level inequality (Shultz 1984). Using asymmetrical gender power relations as a way to assess the influence of employment on women's empowerment, one must search for explanations of why unequal divisions of labor exist within the home (Mumtaz and Salway 2005), and how these inequalities relate to formal employment.

In an attempt to address inequalities experienced by women, many scholars point to formalized employment as a key indicator of "emancipation" or empowerment (Vasavi 1993;

Salway et al. 2005). However, scholars and practitioners tend to overlook the historical and social forces specific to the location of Bangladesh that influence the characteristics of women's work experience. Through low-cost female labor, occupational segregation, and sexual wage differences (Hartman 1979; Rubery 1978), scholars observe male superiors continuing to dictate the circumstances of women's work (Standing 1991). To explain differences in women's employment experiences, scholars from different disciplines provide a variety of "explanations." Social scholars state differentiation in the labor market as the product of male laborers' comparative advantage as earners (Standing 1991; Sharma 1986). Marxists view discrimination in the workplace as a product of women being a reserve army of labor (Standing 1991; Mumtaz and Salway 2005), and feminists (Vasavi 1993; Hartman 1979) connect gendered divisions of labor by highlighting women's dual job.[11] However, while social scientists, Marxists, and feminists all recognize asymmetries in workplace treatment, these explanations operate more as descriptions, applicable to contemporary Western Europe (Standing 1991) rather than urban Bangladesh.

Seeking to explain inequalities in the context of urban Bangladesh, spatial and historical dimensions play a significant role in dictating the conditions of women's work. According to studies that document the conditions of women's work, scholars describe low wages, lack of access to skills, constraints on production (due to harassing workplace conditions), and the unlikelihood of promotion as key disadvantages women experience in comparison to men (Mumtaz and Salway 2005; Young et al. 1984). In this way, women neither enter the workforce equally, nor receive equal treatment as laborers (Standing 1991; Young et al. 1984). This discrimination differentiates women's employment from men's. While many scholars emphasize the exploitation of women's labor in terms of wage discrimination (Salway et al. 2005; Amin 2007), this assumes women's incorporation to be purely a result of "cheap labor." On the contrary, the act of incorporating certain groups into low rungs of wage labor is a common phenomenon, one that is not entirely restricted to women (Amin 1998; Salway et al. 2005). In this case, the interplay between population groups (i.e., women) within the context of Bangladesh causes one to consider what prompted the entry of women into the workforce in this country. Why are women being incorporated into the workforce at this time? Workforce discrimination is not just a gender-specific matter. This point, made by Standing (1991), highlights the importance of recognizing femaleness and maleness as products of history and society. In other words, women's designation today as cheap labor is not a product of their surplus, dual roles, or the comparative advantage of men; rather, women's "cheapness" remains a product of social and historical constructions significant over space and time. It is therefore empirical that studies recognize gendered stereotypes as characteristic of cultural ideology, rather than biology (Ibid.).

Noting the impact of historical and cultural ideology on workplace inequality, it is critical that scholars and practitioners understand the social and historical context that defines women's status in the formal market (Mumtaz and Salway 2005; Salway et al. 2005). However, the failure of practitioners and policymakers to create frameworks and models that highlight the roots of gender inequality ultimately underscores the significance of pre-existing urban Bangladeshi values.

---

[11] As a paid and unpaid worker, in the workplace, and in the home.

Beyond the Household: Urban Risk and Vulnerability

In excluding country-specific dimensions from theoretical understandings, politicians and practitioners not only reinforce fundamental drivers of inequality, but also marginalize the urban risks and vulnerabilities experienced by working women. Indeed, when discussing gender and its relationship with Bangladeshi urban culture, it is important to note that gender norms and expectations influence behavior within and beyond the household (Standing 1991; Salway et al. 2005). In other words, gendered experiences, especially with regard to risk and vulnerability, should be examined through women's spatial experiences beyond the home.

Within the workplace, the most commonly reported exploitative practices include unpaid over-time, unequal wages, and hazardous working conditions (Siddiqui 2003; Vasavi 1997). Reacting to women's reports, activists and scholars consistently focus on issues regarding equal pay and factory health and safety (Siddiqui 2003). Yet outside actors tend to overlook key vulnerabilities and risks, such as sexual harassment, rape, and verbal and physical abuse. Issues such as these, although rarely reported to outsiders,[12] are intimately tied to women's production rates, health, safety, and equality in the workplace.

When delving into issues regarding sexual harassment within the workplace, one observes the presence of household-level power dynamics and tensions. Despite assumptions by practitioners and policymakers who theorized that integration into the formal capitalistic system would "free" women (Elson 1999; Hart 1997; Folbre 1986), traditional norms and cultural beliefs are re-emerging in workplace environments. The continuation of uneven gendered power dynamics[13] impacts women's health, income, and job security in new ways and in new spaces. For instance, women alter their interpretations of female-specific seclusion, or "purduh,"[14] to enter the workforce.[15] Indeed, in continuing to practice purduh, the boundaries of the factory replace that of the home, and women identify factory supervisors and managers as equivalent to family elders (Siddiqui 2003). Therefore, despite formal employment, women continue to align themselves with household level social norms and expectations. This clearly reflects the reality that men and women's actions are largely dictated by traditional gender roles, regardless of time and place.

The extension of gendered roles and unequal power dynamics within the workplace not only reveals the persistence of female inequality and subordination, but also indicates the failure of formal employment to eradicate gendered vulnerabilities and risks. Although not a frequent topic of scholarly discussion, the presence of patriarchy poses extreme obstacles for women in the workplace. Attempting to resist male advances and harassment, women continue to rely on existing ideological beliefs about "good" Bengali women (Ibid.). Trying to avoid male attention, women wear borkhas, or large ornas, and refrain from "talking back" (Elson 1999; Siddiqui 2003). Aware of the social stigma associated with discussing sexuality, women are generally reluctant to press charges for fear of being sexualized or further shamed (Siddiqui 2003; Dyson and Moore 1983). Women's coping strategies of silence

---

[12] For fear of retribution or social shame.

[13] In settings beyond the household.

[14] Seclusion of women.

[15] "Purduh" is a Muslim practice aimed at ensuring sexual purity, and requires women to stay within the confines of their home.

and physical protection emphasize the carry-over of gendered power dynamics from the household.

In addition to the power dynamics typically found in the home, women must adapt to new manifestations of subordination and shame. Siddiqui (2003) finds that low-wage workers (like garment factory workers) are stereotyped as slothful, lacking sexual discipline, and "needing to get work out of them" (Siddiqui 2003, 8). Based on these stereotypes, abuse and sexual coercion fall in line with traditional disciplinary methods found in Bangladesh (Siddiqui 2003; Dyson and Moore 1983; Standing 1991). Experiencing multiple forms of physical and verbal harassment in working environments, women have reported commonalities such as highly sexualized vocabulary, body language used to discipline, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and in some cases, rape (Siddiqui 2003; Salway et al. 2005). According to women workers, common practices such as these create work environments that are highly sexualized, intimidating, and hostile. Furthermore, in smaller factories, women workers report higher levels of sexual coercion and intimidation. Night work is associated with higher rates of assault or rape, with smaller factory sites again being the most dangerous for women workers. Within factories where payments are irregular and privileges are limited, women report increased pressure to "succumb to the advances of men who are higher up than them" (Siddiqui 2003, 3), which blurs the line of consent and coercion (Salway et. al 2005; Standing 1991; Siddiqui 2003). Constrained by gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes, women enter and operate in the job market unequal to men. It should come as no surprise to scholars, practitioners, and politicians that hierarchies of gender related skills exist to maintain the status quo. Reinforcing the status quo not only solidifies the existence of gendered segregation and inequality, but also fosters the existence of gendered risk and vulnerability.

Gender is not the only "…axis on which workers [experience] exploitation in their daily lives" (Siddiqui 2003, 7). According to first-hand accounts, women's responses to verbal and sexual coercion depend on women's workplace, job security, and economic circumstance. Indeed, Siddiqui (2003) notes that when jobs are more precarious, workers have less leverage and are therefore more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment. Additionally, economic and social deprivation greatly influences workers' perceptions of their future and the likelihood of justice (Siddiqui 2003). However, despite the negative impact on industrial production efficiency, sexual harassment continues to run rampant. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that women's integration into the capitalist system will automatically "free" them of patriarchy and gendered inequalities. Through the observation of sexual harassment in the workplace, the existence of gendered power imbalances remain obvious in the formal work system.

Women in Public Space

Beyond the workplace, the continuation of gendered inequality can be observed through women's experiences in urban space. Indeed, according to Bangladesh-specific scholars, the spatial agglomerations taking place in Dhaka (a product of globalization and the restructuring of industrial production) create and enable environments where gendered power dynamics manifest (Standing 1991). The public urban space of Dhaka, predominantly dictated by male preferences, interests, and needs, remains one of the most dangerous

sites for industrial workers (Siddiqui 2003; Salway et al. 2005).

In Dhaka's urban public spaces, women frequently experience physical, verbal, and sexual harassment. Like in the workplace, women attempt to resist harassment by avoiding eye contact, covering their bodies, and spending little time in public space (Siddiqui 2003). Place and time of day also play a significant role in determining women's urban risk. Similarly, differences in male and female "entitlements and rights" are apparent in public space, just as they are in the workplace and household (Siddiqui 2003). Where women remain restricted and fearful, males exert their right to "regulate mobility and sexuality." Women's personal restriction of movement, behavior, and dress also reflects high levels of inequality and vulnerability within the public environment. For this reason, it is important to note that women's decision to enter public space is more often a reflection of necessity, rather than liberation or independence.

Recommendations for Development and Policy

Thinking Strategically

Noting the need to complexify our understanding of female empowerment, we must critically examine and reevaluate the foundation of development strategies and priorities that guide policy formation. As previously explained, current development models provide overly simplistic economic norms and expectations grounded in Western theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, researcher bias often influences methods and analysis, and thus limits the accuracy of these findings. Finally, while power dynamics within the household remain intimately connected with those of the workplace and public space, they are conceptually separate. This inability of conceptual models to address or fully encompass the complex nature of women's experiences in the workplace, household, and public arena is clearly problematic. That said, new methods of analysis must be employed to encompass these production spheres and evaluate the reality of true female empowerment. In doing so, the emphasis must be placed on the politics, history, culture, and spatial components that influence women's experiences. Only through the integration of both the household and workplace production spheres will scholars and practitioners truly grasp the place-specific variables influencing women's experiences in the context of formal employment.

On a practical level, we must also understand that tradeoffs exist in development work. The reality that policies have significant repercussions beyond their intended outcome highlights that we cannot view these issues in isolation. The following situations are examples of tradeoffs that warrant critical discussion and inquiry, prior to assuming policy outcomes:

When mothers are employed in the formal sector, their daughters are often pulled from school to take on household work (Rosenweig 1986; Kabeer 1994). We must therefore consider the factors that pit women's employment against girls' education, and the relationship between workforce and household production.

- When considering issues within the household, it is important to note that female subordination often ensures social protection from the male head of household. Consequently, challenging this hierarchy is often at odds with women's personal security and social status (Kabeer 1994).

- Formal employment compounds women's preexisting roles and responsibilities, and inevitably decreases leisure time (Folbre 1986). Multiple studies show that women work more hours than men on average (Kabeer 1994), and it is common that women's work outside the home does not necessitate a redistribution of household tasks between males and females. As a result, market participation has different implications for women's health and wellbeing than it does for men.

- When skill acquisition is posed as an approach to make women more competitive in the labor market, this ignores the fact that high levels of female employment in the garment industry hinges on their supposed "cheapness" and disposability (Amin 1997; Salway et al. 2005). In this regard, improving women's perceived labor-market disadvantage may actually conflict with women's employability.

These tradeoffs emphasize the importance of socio-cultural knowledge and awareness with regard to household dimensions, labor market conditions, and constraints of public space. By acknowledging the tradeoffs that accompany policy implementation, we argue that the complexity of women's experiences be embedded in policy development.

Indicators of Empowerment:

In the specific context of female garment factory work in urban Bangladesh, we consider the idea of empowerment and the misconceptions that arise when analyzing women's employment. As previously noted, when inaccurate frameworks are used to define an issue, policies are often designed using limited strategies and measured with false or incomplete indicators. In a world where development programs must appeal to donors and large institutions, many argue in favor of "selling ideas through popular and simplistic language" (Van Santen 2009, 3), yet it is crucial that policies are based on reality. Keeping this in mind, we draw into question our own notions of empowerment. With the understanding that this concept will continue to evolve and change depending on the specific context of development, the key component in this effort is maintaining a critical analysis of what empowerment means. In other words, we must consider: Who are the individuals being "empowered?" Who is defining "empowerment?" What are the assumptions of key players who are evaluating "empowerment," e.g., community-based or non-governmental organizations, intergovernmental agencies, international institutions, etc. (Kabeer 1994)?

In an effort to supplement the currently limited notions of empowerment, we have constructed a set of indicators that can be applied when analyzing whether employment truly means empowerment. However, given that culture and space are extremely specific, we do not assume that these can fully predict individual outcomes and experiences across the board. Additionally, we recognize that these indicators are potentially biased given the limitations of methods based on Western notions of empowerment. Keeping in mind this complexity, we pose the following indicators.

Women's employment is likely to be empowering when:

- Women control income and resources, and subsequently have more bargaining power and influence in family decision-making, e.g., resource allocation and fertility decisions (Lim 2009).

- Women's employment is fairly compensated and their income is a significant and recognized contribution to the family economic welfare. In turn, the opportunity costs of taking women out of the workforce and of women having children are higher, i.e., competing productive and reproductive roles (Ibid.).

- Women receive higher returns from participating in the workforce (e.g. self-worth, satisfaction, autonomy, bargaining power, economic security, etc.) than they do from not participating in the workforce, e.g., receiving the "protection" of the male head of household, long-term security as a result of cooperation, avoiding the risks associated with conflict, etc. (Kabeer 1994).

- Women's employment has "income-earning capacity" that allows for economic and financial gain on an individual and household level.

- Women's employment minimizes the need to have children in order to provide security in their old age or during unfavorable economic conditions (Cain et al. 1979).

- Women's contribution to family prosperity is significant in a way that leads to a reduction in gender preference for children and more positive attitudes about daughters. Note: Son preference in South Asia stems from the perceived economic liability of daughters (Cain et al. 1979; Lim 2009).

- In lower-income households, women's employment leads to greater investment in girls' education, and does not impose the expectation that daughters must fill the gap left by the mother, i.e., daughters are often pulled from school to complete household tasks (Kabeer 1994; Lim 2009).

- Women's employment increases the ability of women and girls to delay early-age marriage and pregnancy (Lim 2009).

- Women can navigate public space without posing a threat to their personal safety or social status (Siddiqui 2003).

- Women maintain and have greater access to extra-household networks and relationships (Kabeer 1994).

Overall, these indicators serve to more accurately understand the complex interactions of women's experiences and how these impact the reality of female empowerment.

Next Steps: How Can Policy Be Improved?

It is crucial to note that this paper should not be used as an argument to deny women access to the formal labor force, nor promote a single identity of women as exploited individuals. Rather, the complexities discussed throughout this paper are intended to improve policy development and emphasize that one solution cannot possibly be applied to everyone everywhere. As previously discussed, there will always be tradeoffs, but understanding the extent of these tradeoffs can help inform more effective policy development.

Practical Recommendations:

Conduct Needs-Based Interviews

Provided that policies and programs are most effective when informed by the audience they intend to serve, women garment factory workers should be consulted about how they envision empowerment (Kabeer 1994). This gender-conscious method would inform policymakers about women's needs. However, particular attention must be paid to both short-term and long-term needs. Since women's immediate needs often outweigh more theoretical notions of gender equality, practitioners need to delve deeper and provide women with the opportunity to construct a vision of their own empowerment (Ibid.). Without the space to do this, many women may report their needs without considering the possibility of what gender equality could look like. Therefore, policies need to address short-term efforts that focus on current responsibilities, daily routines, and assigned roles, as well as long-term, transformative efforts that focus on elevating women's status and ensuring empowerment (Ibid.).

Conduct "Empowerment" Assessments

Researchers in the field need to properly identify gendered power imbalances and avoid the use of broad "empowerment" indicators. Since income-generation and employment in the formal sector do not automatically ensure the validation of women's work or the safety and elevated status of the individual, the effects of employment must be critically examined (Whitehead and Kabeer 2001). In order to conduct this examination, it is crucial to develop appropriate research questions that prevent researcher bias. Constructing appropriate questions will help ensure accuracy and provide respondents with the opportunity to discuss the reality of their experiences. To guide the development of these empowerment assessments, ten sample questions are provided below:

1.) How much money do you make?

2.) How many hours per day or per week do you work?

3.) What portion of the family income do you contribute?

4.) How is income distributed in the household? Who manages the family's finances?

5.) Who takes on your household roles and responsibilities when you're working?

6.) How is your non-paid work recognized as a contribution to household welfare?

7.) What time of day do you travel to and from work?

8.) How would you describe your travel to and from work? Favorable, unfavorable, or neutral? Please explain.

9.) What mode of transportation do you use to get to and from work? Do you travel alone or in groups?

10.) How do you cope with obstacles in public space or the workplace?

Mobilize Unions

There are currently not enough unions willing to organize on behalf of women. Additionally, unions (like current "empowerment" frameworks) are often ineffective since they fail to engage with women's workplace concerns and challenges. Finally, many workers are unaware of existing unions and workplace protections (Siddiqui 2003). Therefore, nongovernmental or community-based organizations should be utilized to bridge the gap between labor unions and female workers. In doing so, the following factors should be considered:

- Women garment factory workers are considered disposable labor and are often at risk of losing their jobs (Ibid.). For this reason, women need to be included in and recognized by existing unions.

- Union officials have the ability to inform women about current labor laws and workers' rights and should promote awareness through advocacy, seminars, or discussions (Broadbent and Ford 2007).

- Unions need to recognize sexual harassment as a legitimate issue within the workplace (Ibid.). Providing specific programs on sexual harassment would create awareness and foster safer workplace environments.

Establish Confidential Harassment Reporting

Since women are typically unwilling to come forward about issues of sexual harassment for reasons of job protection and social dignity, creating confidential and safe-reporting processes for women in the workplace would help ensure protection *and* compensation for cases of harassment or sexual coercion.

Increase Workers' Wages

Lower wages reinforce the notion that women's work is less valuable than men's, which further contributes to the perception that women do not significantly contribute to the economic well-being of the household. This "perceived contribution" negatively impacts female

bargaining power. In other words, it is not enough that women hold remunerated, formal-sector work; rather, this work must be visible and valued (Sen 1999; Kabeer 1994).

Theoretical Recommendations:

Challenge Current Policy Development

The people whom policies intend to help must be the key actors informing those policies. While many grassroots movements, community organizations, and social groups may fight to make their voices heard, this is not always enough (Kabeer 1994). It is essentially the responsibility of policymakers to genuinely listen by providing legitimate time, resources, and space for women to voice their concerns. This has the potential to encourage government officials, policymakers, unions, and development organizations to understand these issues and serve as conscious allies (Ibid.). Ultimately, rather than developing policies for women, we must develop policies with women. In this effort, when policies are adopted to fill a "need," policymakers must ask a series of questions (Ibid.):

- Who determined that need?

- What priorities and norms are being assumed to determine that need?

- How should that need be met?

- What resources should be allocated to meet that need?"

- Is equity being considered?

Understand "Cultural Imperialism"

Cultural imperialism involves imposing a foreign viewpoint on another culture or community (Ibid.). This is often a factor when forming development policies that involve changes to intimate and private components of people's lives (e.g., the intra-household dynamics or power relations between men and women). However, there is a difference between cultural imperialism and social change. While culture and tradition must be respected and regarded as valuable components of people's identities, we must understand the differentiated ways in which cultural norms affect people within a society (Ibid.). In other words, what may be viewed as a value or norm for one person (e.g., the male head of household), may in fact be experienced as a destructive force for another (e.g., a subordinated female). Therefore, cultural imperialism should not be used as an excuse for inaction, but as a point of consideration to make conscious decisions. Most importantly, by engaging with the community in a participatory fashion (e.g., dialogue, consultation, etc.), policies can be developed with the community's support to create social change.

Shift Societal Attitudes About Women

Many policies require a shift in societal attitudes about women. While this reversal will not happen immediately, there are steps that can be taken to encourage this process. For example, researchers can help influence practices in the workplace by emphasizing the correlation between sexual harassment and low worker productivity (Siddiqui 2003; Sen 1999). This would potentially provide an economic incentive for employers to change coercive management practices and protect women. Additionally, practitioners can conduct gender sensitivity and awareness training for agencies responsible for protecting people's rights, e.g., police officers, lawyers, judges, etc. (Ibid.). Since law enforcement is ineffective if the people enforcing the laws view women as "guilty" (e.g., in cases of harassment, sexual abuse, rape, etc.), then more gender-conscious law enforcement practices could help increase social protections for women. These are only two examples, but they speak to the potential of small changes to influence larger shifts in societal attitudes and expectations about women.

Keeping these recommendations in mind, it is important to recognize that we cannot truly understand the lived experiences of all women and the multiplicity of their identities. Thus, we challenge practitioners to be aware of their personal assumptions and projections when evaluating the effectiveness of these policies.

Conclusion

Although understanding gender and female empowerment within the development realm can be a complex task, simplifying these ideas prevents practitioners and policymakers from developing a greater understanding of context-specific intricacies, and therefore leads to the failure of development policies (Van Santen 2009). In other words, it is better to struggle with an idea and make progress, than maintain inaccurate expectations of how those ideas materialize in practice (Kabeer 1994; Van Santen 2009). By analyzing female garment factory workers in urban Bangladesh, this paper engages with this challenge. Through a discussion of theoretical frameworks, development assumptions, and policy approaches, this paper highlights the complexity of gendered power dynamics and their influence on women's spatial experiences in the household, in public, and in the workplace. In doing so, readers have an opportunity to question notions of female empowerment, and researchers and practitioners are invited to further explore and scrutinize the fundamental drivers of gender inequality. We ultimately provide recommendations in an effort to inform effective policy development that addresses the reality of true female empowerment. Indeed, only through ongoing critical analysis of these issues will on-the-ground progress and transformation take place. ■

REFERENCES

Alam, M. Sayeed, Abdus Sattar, and S. I. Chaudhury. 2011. "Work Family Conflict of Women Managers in Dhaka." Asian Social Science 7, no. 7.

Amin, Ash. 2007. «Re-Thinking the Urban Social." City 11, no. 1: 100-114.

Amin, Sajeda. 1997. "The Poverty–Purdah Trap in Rural Bangladesh: Implications for Women's Roles in the Family." Development and Change 28, no. 2: 213-233.

Amin, Sajeda. 1998. "Family Structure and Change in Rural Bangladesh." Population Studies 52, no. 2: 201-213.

Bourgignon, Francois, and Pierre-Andre Chiappori. 1992. "Collective Models of Household Behavior: An Introduction." European Economic Review 36, no. 2: 355-364.

Buvinić, Mayra. 1989. "Investing in Poor Women: The Psychology of Donor Support." World Development 17, no. 7: 1045-1057.

Buvinić, Mayra, Margaret A. Lycette, and William Paul McGreevey, eds. 1983. Women and Poverty in the Third World. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Cain, Mead, Syeda Rokeya Khanam, and Shamsun Nahar. 1979. "Class Patriarchy and Women's Work in Bangladesh." Population and Development Review 5, no. 3: 405-38.

Cornwall, Andrea, Elizabeth Harrison, and Ann Whitehead. 2007. "Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development." Development and Change 38, no. 1: 1-20.

Daly, Herman E. 1981. Energy, Economics, and the Environment: Conflicting Views of an Essential Interrelationship. Boulder: Westview Press.

Desai, Sonalde, and Devaki Jain. 1992. "Maternal Employment and Changes in Family Dynamics: the Social Context of Women's Work in Rural South India."

Duveen, Gerard, and Barbara Lloyd, eds. 1990. Social Representations and the Development of Knowledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dyson, Tim, and Mick Moore. 1983. "On Kinship Structure, Female Autonomy, and Demographic Behavior in India." Population and Development Review 9, no. 1: 35-60.

Elson, Diane. 1999. "Labor Markets as Gendered Institutions: Equality, Efficiency and Empowerment Issues." World Development 27, no. 3: 611-627.

Folbre, Nancy. 1986. "Hearts and Spades: Paradigms of Household Economics." World Development 14, no. 2: 245-255.

Ferguson, Ann. 1979. "Women as a New Revolutionary Class," in Between Labor and Capital, ed. Pat Walker. Boston: South End Press. 279-312.

Guijt, Irene, and Meera Kaul Shah. 1998. The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Hart, Gillian. 1997. "From 'Rotten Wives' to 'Good Mothers': Household Models and the Limits of Economism." IDS bulletin 28, no. 3: 14-25.

Hartman, Heidi I. 1979. "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union." Capital and Class 3, no. 2: 1-33.

Harvey, David. 1969. Explanation in Geography. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Hindin, Michelle J., and Linda S. Adair. 2002. "Who's at Risk? Factors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence in the Philippines." Social Science & Medicine 55, no. 8: 1385-1399.

Jeffery, Roger, and Alaka Malwade Basu. 1996. Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Kabeer, Naila. 1994. Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought. New York: Verso.

Kabir, M., Ruhul Amin, Ashraf Uddin Ahmed, and Jamir Chowdhury. 1994. "Factors Affecting Desired Family Size in Bangladesh." Journal of Biosocial Science 26, no. 3: 369-375.

Koenig, Michael A., Saifuddin Ahmed, Mian Bazle Hossain, and ABM Khorshed Alam Mozumder. 2003. "Women's Status and Domestic Violence in Rural Bangladesh: Individual- and Community-Level Effects." Demography 40, no. 2: 269-288.

Lim, Lin L. 2009. "Female Labour-Force Participation." Completing the Fertility Transition Special Issue, nos. 48/49: 17-18.

Mumtaz, Zubia, and Sarah Salway. 2005. "'I Never Go Anywhere': Extricating the Links Between Women's Mobility and Uptake of Reproductive Health Services in Pakistan." Social Science & Medicine 60, no. 8: 1751-1765.

Naved, Ruchira T., Margaret Newby, and Sajeda Amin. 2001. "The Effects of Migration and Work on Marriage of Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh." International Journal of Population Geography 7, no. 2: 91-104.

Rosenzweig, Mark R. and T. Paul Schultz. 1986. "Market Opportunities, Genetic Endowments, and Intrafamily Resources Distribution." American Economic Review 72, no. 9: 803-815.

Rubery, Jill. 1978. "Structured Labour Markets, Worker Organisation and Low Pay."Cambridge Journal of Economics 2, no. 1: 17-36.

Salway, Sarah, Sonia Jesmin, and Shahana Rahman. 2005. "Women's Employment in Urban Bangladesh: A Challenge to Gender Identity?" Development and Change 36, no. 2: 317-349.

Sen, Amartya. 1999. Commodities and Capabilities. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sharma, Ursula. 1986. Women's Work, Class, and the Urban Household: A Study of Shimla, North India. New York: Tavistock Publications.

Schultz, T. Paul. 1984. "Studying the Impact of Household Economic and Community Variables on Child Mortality." Population and Development Review 10, Suppl: 215-235.

Shultz, T. Paul. 1981. The Economics of Population. Boston: Addison-Wesley.

Siddiqi, Dina M. 2003. "The Sexual Harassment of Industrial Workers: Strategies for Intervention in the Workplace and Beyond." CPD-UNFPA Publication Series No. 26.

Soja, Edward W. 2000. Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Standing, Hilary. 1991. Dependence and Autonomy: Women's Employment and the Family in Calcutta. London: Routledge.

Storper, Michael. 1997. The Regional World: Territorial Development in a Global Economy. New York: The Guilford Press.

Thomas, Duncan. 1990. "Intra-Household Resource Allocation: An Inferential Approach." Journal of Human Resources 25, no. 4: 635-664.

Thomas, Duncan. 1993. "The Distribution of Income and Expenditure within the Household." Annales d'Economie et de Statistique, no. 29: 109-135.

Van Santen, Rieneke M. 2009. Review of "Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development," by Cornwall et al. October 30, 2009.

Vasavi, A. R. 1993. "Arguing with the Crocodile: Gender and Class in Bangladesh." Culture & Agriculture 13, no. 47: 26-26.

Whitehead, Ann, and Naila Kabeer. 2001. "Living with Uncertainty: Gender Livelihoods and Pro-Poor Growth in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa." Institute of Development Studies Working Paper 134.

Young, Kate, Carol Wolkowitz, and Roslyn McCullagh, eds. 1984. Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and Its Lessons. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul