



Lund University Master of Science in
International Development and Management
June, 2013

A light in the dark

The impact of increased knowledge of
poor rural women on their lives

**An explorative case study of the outcomes of the ACCESS
program interventions in Bangladesh**

Author: Loa Ingvarsdottir
Supervisor: Axel Fredholm

Abstract

This research explored the relationship between new knowledge and increased awareness towards action and considered how the women participating in the ACCESS program in Netrakona in Bangladesh were acting upon their newly gained knowledge in terms of social and institutional change. Qualitative methods were used to capture the discursive change in the micro settings among the participants. In order to answer the research question, semi-structured interviews were used to get access to participants' inner qualities and inner feelings and furthermore to capture the depth of their personalities.

Discursive institutional theory was employed through Schmidt's model of different stages of institutional change, through *thinking*, *speaking* and *acting*, in combination with Kabeer's model of Dimensions of Empowerment on three dimensions of power, i.e. resources, agency and achievement. These two models were formulated into the analytical framework for the study.

The findings showed that discursive change can be identified on different levels and that institutional change can begin on a *thinking* level. Nonetheless, the findings also demonstrated how abstract and complex institutional change is and how various factors will always play a big role in the process of it and affect how much agency one can gain and use. It also showed how through the power of unity the participants realized how they gained more by supporting each other and seeing the group as a community.

(Word Count: 13.582)

Acknowledgements

I would like to express deep my gratitude to everyone who contributed and supported me through this study, particularly the women participating in the ACCESS program who were willing to share and trust me with their stories. I would like to thank all the wonderful staff at SUS, especially Ms. Rokeya, Mr. Kazi, Ms. Sultana, Mr. Murshed and The Swallows India Bangladesh for their support and all the warm hearted people in Bangladesh that I met and who showed me such a wonderful hospitality during my stay.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Axel Fredholm, for his support, encouragement and insightful comments as well as Lisa Eklund and the LUMID staff and teachers for their support.

To Gunnar, the rock in my life and my life companion, for his endless support and love.

And lastly, to my beautiful son, Ingvar, who was extremely brave and mature while his mom had to be away during the field work.

CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction.....6
 - 1.1 Research Problem6
 - 1.2 The ACCESS Program in Netrakona.....7
 - 1.3 Research Question and the Purpose8
 - 1.4 Thesis Outline9
- 2.0 Methodology.....9
 - 2.1 Research Design10
 - 2.2 Sampling.....10
 - 2.3 Research Techniques12
 - 2.4 Quality Considerations.....13
 - 2.5 Ethical Considerations13
- 3.0 Theoretical Framework.....15
 - 3.1 Discursive Institutional Theory.....15
 - 3.2 Empowerment and Agency16
 - 3.3 Analytical Framework.....17
- 4.0 Analytical Framework.....18
 - 4.1 Program Activities19
 - 4.2 The Power of Knowledge22
 - 4.2.1 Thinking differently.....23
 - 4.2.2 Speaking differently.....26
 - 4.2.3 Acting differently28
 - 4.3 Agency – Social Awareness31
 - 4.4 Five Different Villages32
 - 4.5 In Summary.....35
- 5.0 To Conclude – *A Light in the Dark*36
- References.....39
- Appendices43
 - Appendix 1: Interviews with Participants43
 - Appendix 2: Abbreviations43
 - Appendix 3: Interview Guide44
 - Appendix 4: Map of the Netrakona District.....45

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure A: Dimension of Empowerment17
Figure B: Institutional Change Framework.....18
Figure C: Institutional Change.....22

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

Bangladeshi women remain to be widely discriminated against, both in the public and the private sector. Many rural women are in backward position in multiple aspects (Sabalamby Unnayan Samity, 2011; Koenig et al., 2003). They face hindrances in protecting their rights due to political, social and economic deprivation at family, society and state level. They are unable to mobilize freely and are extremely vulnerable to violation of their rights. Households are most often male-dominated which results in a very limited decision-making power for women (The Swallows India Bangladesh, 2012; Mitra et al, 1994).

Domestic violence is a daily reality among many women in Bangladesh and laws and regulations on domestic violence and sexual harassment have unfortunately not yet been adopted (Human Rights Watch, 2011). In Bangladesh, girls have a higher rate of mortality, malnutrition and illiteracy than boys (UNICEF, 2009). Frequently, girls' mobility gets pervasively limited after puberty, which affects their possibilities to learn and participate in social activities (The Swallows India Bangladesh, 2012; Kabir, 2012).

Although Bangladesh has seen some improvements over the last years in terms of human development, UNDP (United Nations Development Program) ranked Bangladesh in the lowest human development category at number 146 out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index for 2012 (UNDP, 2013).

Bangladesh is a member state to the main United Nations human rights conventions (The United Nations, 2011), such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights from 1966 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women from 1979, which it acceded to on 6 September 2000 and 6 November 1984 respectively. It must be noted that there is not in force any *regional* human rights convention or supervisory mechanism in Asia, similar to the ones in Europe or America, that individuals can have recourse to in the event when the state does not protect, respect or fulfil its human rights obligations towards them. In addition, most national laws are in place but have not been fully implemented. This is likely due to both ignorance of the law, corruption and extremely strong culture and norms in the society, which often override the laws (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Kabir, 2012).

Male dominance is substantially rooted in the Bangladeshi culture and women, especially in the poorer rural areas, are frankly not aware that they have any rights at all. They were brought up thinking that they are not free and that they belong to someone else. This strong male preference is clearly reflected in the households. As soon as girls are born they experience discrimination with regard to the way they are treated vis-à-vis boys, when it comes, for instance to behaviour and acceptance. The male child is taught that it is his right to be served food, whereas the female child should be the one serving the food. Still now, women and girls eat after the men and the boys have eaten. The lady of the house is always the one who is the last to eat. Mentally, that insecurity remains within women (The Swallows India Bangladesh, 2012; Kabir, 2012).

In the rural areas the women often sing an old song, which describes well how they feel:

When I am born I am in my father's house.
When I get married I go to my husband's house.
When I become a widow I go to my son's house.
So, where is my house?

(Kabir, 2012).

1.2 The ACCESS Program in Netrakona

Netrakona is in the northern part of Bangladesh and is one of the poorest districts in the country. In addition, the number of child marriages and young motherhood in this district are among the highest in the country, resulting in extremely poor maternal health and very limited access to medical care (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). In order to pull their weight in improve this situation, the Bangladeshi organization Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) along with two other local NGOs and a Swedish NGO, the Swallows, have a women's program called ACCESS, which has the aim to eradicate discrimination against women, by creating awareness at grass root level to national level about the rights of poor and marginalized women. It's aim is furthermore, to establish more equal society where everyone has the opportunity and necessary information to be active and is able to participate fully in the society, as well as focusing

on increasing access and participation in decision-making, both within the family as well as outside it. The program links together government entities and the right-holders (The Swallows India Bangladesh, 2012). The program was designed in 2011, with a pilot run in 2012, and will fully be implemented this year.

From September to November 2012 I had the opportunity to do an internship with the Swallows India Bangladesh and SUS where I was able to observe the ACCESS program, listen to group discussions and interview some of the women participating. It is on this experience I am basing my research, with a focus on the beneficiaries' perspectives of the program as I was interested to investigate how increased knowledge on people's rights can affect their thinking and behaviour and how the women were acting upon their new knowledge.

In the ACCESS program, five different groups were formulated from five different villages, with 20 women in each group. The groups had been meeting once a month for eight months when I first met and spoke with them. Their education was in the form of workshops on gender, rights and law, seed collection and preservation, income generating activities and on the roles of service provider and service receiver, both from the government and non-government level. For every workshop the group had to choose five women to participate from each group (rotated for every workshop) that made in total 20 women in each workshop. In the workshop the women got the chance to meet women from other groups and discuss their thoughts and ideas. After the workshop, those five women who participated in the workshop from each village were collectively responsible to go back home and educate the rest of the group on what they had learned.

1.3 Research Question and the Purpose

How do women, participating in the ACCESS program, act upon their new knowledge when it comes to social change?

The purpose of the research is to capture the discursive social change in the micro settings approach among the participants of the ACCESS program after they joined the program and to uncover the mechanism triggered by the interventions to explore if any

change was generated by the intervention. Have their agencies changed after they gained new knowledge and resources through the education? Have their gender norms changed during the process of increased education and awareness of their rights? Did all the women experience the same agencies/achievements or can change be divided into different stages?

The study proceeds from discursive institutional theory, which is valuable when investigating change that is subtle and not very visible. The theory is used to analyse on a deeper level how the discursive social change among the women participating in the ACCESS program is manifested and how it can create and affect dynamics and interactions and influence the whole process of change.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The preceding chapter gave an overview of the research problem, introducing the research question and the purpose of this study and provides general background to the situation in Bangladesh as well on the ACCESS program. Chapter two considers the methodology and the research design and motivates the choice of the research methods for this study. Chapter three contains theoretical discussion and concepts of discursive institutional theory formulated in the analytical framework with Kabeer's approach of Dimension of Empowerment through successful intervention and Schmidt's model of Institutional Change through three different levels of change. Chapter four presents the analysis of the thesis on the process of change and how the ACCESS participants are acting upon their new knowledge. Chapter five is the closing chapter where findings are summarized, research question answered and conclusions drawn.

2.0 Methodology

This chapter provides methodological approach for the thesis, research design and motivation for the chosen research method.

For my inquiry I chose a qualitative approach, because in order to answer my research question and capture the discursive change in the micro settings among the participants, it was essential for me to talk to the women and get access to their inner qualities and inner feelings and furthermore to capture the depth of their personalities. My data collection and analysis are therefore formulated by the tradition of qualitative

research as that approach allows me to discover how their mindset have changed and what impact that will have when it comes to institutional framework (Silverman, 2010). Moreover, as the purpose of this inquiry is not to generalize the findings for a larger scope, but rather to explore and explain a relatively complex phenomenon within the case of participants in ACCESS situated in Netrakona, and furthermore to give those women a voice where their stories can be told, qualitative methods fit well (Bryman, 2008).

From ontological and epistemological standpoints I work from a constructivist and an interpretive approach to investigate and understand the social settings of the participants in the ACCESS program. My main interest is to investigate how individuals view their reality through their daily activities and interactions (Silverman, 2010).

This study was made with an inductive approach, as it was important to me to allow the stories within my data collection to flow within its own context and to allow the unexpected information to come freely out and influence the investigation as a whole. From that point it came clear what theory was needed to draw on and support my analysis (Ragin & Amoroso, 2011).

2.1 Research Design

The design draws on case studies of five different groups of women in various villages all in the Netrakona district, where living situations are substantially similar between villages, i.e. poor and marginalized women with no or little education and the diversity in each group was similar regarding age, education and marital status.

This, in combination with my qualitative methodology, allows for closer contact with the participants to comprehend the information received, their feelings and thoughts and allowing their stories to be told. When using the case study design it is paramount to protect the characteristics of the empirical findings by verifying their authentic settings without external factors influencing it (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

2.2 Sampling

Before I left Sweden I had been in contact with SUS and had already received a positive response that they would assist me in getting access to the women participating in the program in order to be able to interview some of them and conduct group discussions.

In five villages, 20 women in each village have been participating in the pilot program since the beginning of March 2012. I visited and observed a meeting with all of the groups and then conducted interviews with two to three women from every group.

My gatekeeper was the ACCESS program coordinator and the organization itself. The program coordinator had instructions to take me to all the villages and make it possible for me to conduct the interviews. In addition, they provided access to other stakeholders who are in different levels relevant to the program and to women's situation in the rural areas in general.

I was aware of the bias it could bring to be introduced to the beneficiaries by someone from SUS, as well as having a SUS employee translating the interviews. As my Bengali knowledge is very limited I had to rely completely on an interpreter, but I was very fortunate that SUS was able and willing to provide a translator for all my interviews. However, I am very aware of the limitation that poses. I realise that this person herself had an idea of how the answers should sound but at the same time she was aware that those answers could help to improve the program and that both the organizations were very open to hear from the participants how they thought their situation could be improved and about their awareness of their rights and implementation of the program. Translation depends on the skills of the interpreter and can be limited and simplified and therefore I felt at some points that I needed to rephrase some questions and ask again to be sure that there was no misunderstanding (Scheyvens & Storey, 2003).

It is also important to consider the fact that the people who are interviewed might be reluctant to reveal some information and even exaggerate other. The SUS' reputation in Netrakona is very good and they are known for how they have helped to improve people's lives in the district. They are known to be transparent and they do encourage people to speak their minds and are willing and open to listen to people's concerns. Nonetheless, as they are very respected it could be likely that some people receiving education from them would like to please them and try to say what they think they should say. Hence, it felt important to emphasize to the translator to be as precise and objective as possible and to underscore to the women interviewed that they should talk about their own opinions and reflections (Ibid).

2.3 Research Techniques

I collected my data through semi-structured individual interviews, group discussions, observation and document examination. Data collection took place from 18 September to 25 October 2012. I visited the five villages participating in the program; Anantapur, Baluakanda, Bonupara, Fachika and Satberiakanda. Each village is about 30 to 40 minutes away from the central town in Netrakona by a rickshaw (a bicycle taxi). I started off visiting one village and observed one group meeting to see how the learning takes place and how the women interact with one another and then the next day I came back to the same village to conduct interviews with one to three women from that group. The women interviewed were identified with variation in mind, both concerning age and also to their characteristics, i.e. I wanted both to talk to women who were outgoing and talkative in the group meetings as well as with those who seemed more withdrawn and demure. Body language observation was an important part of my interview techniques whereas the women were not always able to convey what they were feeling. By using body language observation I was able to grasp the feelings and situation of the women I was interviewing. Not only words can tell you a story, as recording what you see, hear, smell and feel can give a clearer holistic picture of the situation and the story the person interviewed is telling. As Bogdan points out, body language observation can be an important tool to get a deeper sense of how the interviewer is feeling and what is said and furthermore what is not said (Bogdan, 1992). Interview settings can vary tremendously and therefore it is vital to allow each setting to be grasped in its own conditions (Silverman, 1985).

By using both verbal and non-verbal tools while obtaining data, the effectiveness of the information gathered can be improved with strengthened plausibility of the results. Non-verbal cues assisted me in distinguishing the level of compatibility between non-verbal and verbal expression of the interviewees. For those individual respondents that are not accustomed to expressing their feelings and have perhaps very seldom done so (like seemed to be the case for many of the women I interviewed) it can prove to be strenuous to open up and begin to speak and express one's feelings. The same applies to those who might fear that what they would say could have adverse consequences. In such cases it is vital that the researcher is conscious and aware of the settings and can heed the non-verbal signals and reflect back on that. This must be done through openness, respect and complete sincerity towards the interviewee (Begley, 1996).

However, the importance of not “interpreting non-verbal cues out of context” should be noted. To avoid such incidences it is essential for the researcher to be cognizant of the timing of all signals and all communication around them. Multiple types of signals of non-verbal expression are also of more significance and give a deeper explanation of the situation than single cues. Thus, the reading of non-verbal behavior must be carried out with caution (Ibid:692).

2.4 Quality Considerations

I sought to understand how the women participating in the ACCESS program act upon their new knowledge and if that knowledge can bring about change. In my data collection, all interviews were tape-recorded and when I went back to Dhaka, the capital, I was able to ask a “neutral” Bengali person to listen to test samples to verify the translation in order to confirm it was accurate and correct (Scheyvens & Storey, 2003). In addition to mitigate as much bias as possible, I tried to use triangulate data by consulting many and diverse sources and to talk to different people about women’s situation in general. Furthermore, in my questioning I tried to ask the same questions in different ways and along with non-verbal cues to ensure triangulation within the data. I had access to program documents from both SUS and The Swallows India Bangladesh, as well as from other national organizations in Bangladesh, which gave me a more holistic picture of the situation in general. Moreover, during my stay I used the opportunity to talk to as many people I could about women’s situation in these areas. I talked to teachers, people working within SUS, people from support groups, such as violence against women, human rights support groups and women activist groups. I also tried to have a more general discussion with “normal” people living in Netrakona, whom I got to know during my stay. I felt that all these talks in addition to the organizational documents gave me a deeper understanding of the situation and also supported the stories from the ACCESS participants. While talking to the women, and later on when transcribing my interviews, I truly felt like they were telling me how they felt and had experienced the program and how it had affected their living situation.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Several ethical challenges have surfaced and come to mind during my fieldwork. The

topic discussed in the interviews can be quite sensitive as it is about women's freedom and rights in a society where many men in fact consider that women should not have any rights. For instance, when the interviewee was not home alone, i.e. either her husband or her mother-in-law was home (which was in fact sometimes considered more dangerous because of their influences on their sons) we moved the interview to another home. However, as the homes were often very poorly constructed anyone who wanted to eavesdrop could easily do so. At one point I felt the need to stop an interview as I noticed that the interview could cause harm to the interviewee. That particular woman was very intimidated by her mother-in-law who dominated her and was going to make sure her daughter-in-law would not besmirch the family's reputation by saying too much. At first the woman interviewed tried to answer my questions in a low voice, but as I noticed how afraid she was and that I was not able to ascertain that her mother-in-law did not hear us I decided to stop the interview. However, during the short period of time that I talked to this woman I was able to observe her emotional responses and body language, which told me more than many words.

During my last village visit to Satberikanda, only few days before I left Netrakona, women in the Hindu communities had started to prepare for their big Durga Puja celebration. This is Hindu's biggest celebration and the women, in particular, are very busy organising and preparing the food many days in advance. During the group discussion I noticed the women were not as willing to stay and talk and they looked stressed and uncomfortable and asked if we could keep it short since they had a lot of work to do. Therefore, this last group discussion was quite abrupt and I felt it was important that I respected their time as well. I also felt I had to accept that I would only be able to conduct one interview in this village due to the same reason.

As I relied completely on access through SUS, it was even more important for me to state and be clear about my intentions and who I was to all who were interviewed and to underscore how my research and work for the thesis was not in any way connected to the organization (Mikkelsen, 2005).

In order to protect the identity of my sources, their names will not be revealed. However, I feel it is important to bring the reader as close to the field settings as possible and therefore I decided to give my sources Bangladeshi alias names. This way I feel their stories can better be brought to life and closer to the reader.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides the theoretical framework and concepts for this qualitative inquiry. It considers discursive institutional theory inspired by historical and sociological institutionalism. This is considered in relation to the process of institutional change and combined and formulated into analytical framework with Vivian Schmidt's (2008) approach to the process of institutional change and Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework on Dimensions of Empowerment, regarding when effective increased agency through intervention is accomplished.

3.1 Discursive Institutional Theory

Institutional theory explains how over a certain amount of time structure, norms, rules and routines can become strong authoritative norms and shape human and social behaviour within societies (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Institutions are often considered "in formal terms as procedures taking place outside agents" (Steen, 2011:49). However, they can also be seen as more internal, where the linkage between institutions and action is stronger and institutions are created, maintained and continually reshaped by the players and are affected by agencies directly (Kulawik, 2009).

Institutional theory can apprehend extensive, clear and obvious change, but moreover it can as well capture less obvious changes (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). As change can occur and start on a *thinking stage*, discursive institutional theory is brought to the equation to explore diverse levels of change. The first signs of change can be captured within people's mind as an act of thinking (Schmidt, 2008). Discursive institutional theory can be valuable to use when investigating change that is subtle and not very visible, as it focuses on discursive change, which starts at the thinking stage and the interactive processes involved in discourse. The main constitution of discourse is ideas, whereas "discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas" (Schmidt, 2008:303).

Discursive institutionalism will in this paper be used to analyse and understand on a deeper level how the discursive social change among the women participating in the ACCESS program is manifested and how it can create and affect dynamics and interactions and influence the whole process of change. By using discursive institutionalism to analyse the data it opens up for visualisation and identification of a

common theme of change within the micro level of institutions, as the theory looks for signals of change within the human behaviour, which challenge the existing situation and the current forms of institutions (Schmidt, 2008).

Feminist institutionalism theory explains “how gender norms operate within institutions and how institutions processes construct and maintain gender power dynamics” (Steen, 2011:49). Feminist institutionalism is important to combine into the framework as the said change refers to communication patterns between the genders and affects the gender power.

3.2 Empowerment and Agency

Empowerment refers to and explores how one can receive the power of choice, a power of choice that did not exist before. As one gains more power he or she can become empowered (Kabeer, 1999). For an individual to become empowered means that this same person would have had been disempowered before. After gaining the ability to exercise its choice that same person becomes empowered. However, many scholars feel it is difficult if possible to clearly define the term of women’s empowerment, as it is quite abstract. I agree with Kabeer on her definition that empowerment is the power of choice that requires for the “process of change” where the capacity to make and exercise a choice is expanded (Kabeer, 2002:19).

Agency in relation to empowerment explains and explores the individual power and capacity to make and control its own choices. Agency is the ability to be free to act independently according to your goals. Therefore motivation and purpose play a big part in agency and how actors carry with them motivation to their actions and motions. As Kabeer argues, agency can both be positive but also negative in relations to power. The difference is “power to” versus “power over”. An agency can be positive when an actor uses it as a force of action to improve its own life and negative when this power is used to “over-ride the agency of others” (Kabeer, 2002:21).

Kabeer’s Dimensions of Empowerment captures well the process and the relationship between resources, agency and achievement (Kabeer, 1999). This model is used as a part of the analytical framework for this study and is described in detail in the next chapter. In Kabeer’s framework she views three dimensions of power, which all influence the process of empowerment, i.e. resources, agency and achievement (Kabeer, 1999; 2002).

Resources as new tools or knowledge which an actor gets opportunities to access. In this dimension Kabeer views agency from the actor's side with a focus on its power to make that choice of change. The opportunity might be there but it is up to the individual to use that choice of action to move the change (Ibid).

Achievement is accomplished according to Kabeer when an actor is able and willing to use its newly gained agency to do things differently and that way improve its life or do something new (Ibid).



Figure A

Dimension of Empowerment - Successful intervention

Source: Naila Kabeer, 1999

Layout: Loa Ingvarsdottir

3.3 Analytical Framework

The theoretical framework used to analyze the data for this study combines the two different, yet very linked, approaches towards institutional change. Firstly, Vivian Schmidt's approach to discourse where she identifies three stages of change from thinking to speaking to acting. Capabilities that allows one to consider institutions on a micro level and at some point begin to question them and seeing them as changeable (Schmidt, 2008). And secondly, Naila Kabeer's approach to an effective intervention through three coherent stages, which can lead to change, i.e. resources, agency and achievement as explained above (chapter 3.2).

This framework is partly influenced by Karin Steen's study, *Time to farm*, who also investigated institutional change with interesting results. In her case she was looking into the dynamics of the gender regime of land and labour rights in farming in Zimbabwe, she uses an institutional analysis and employed an institutional framework on how women exercise their right and the different stages of it through thinking, speaking and acting, where she also refers to Vivian Schmidt's framework of discursive. Her findings show "how the gender regime is subject to institutional process" where she was able to identify among others "early and gradual institutional change" through these

three different stages of thinking, speaking and acting (Steen, 2011:174). My study is another attempt to follow this track.

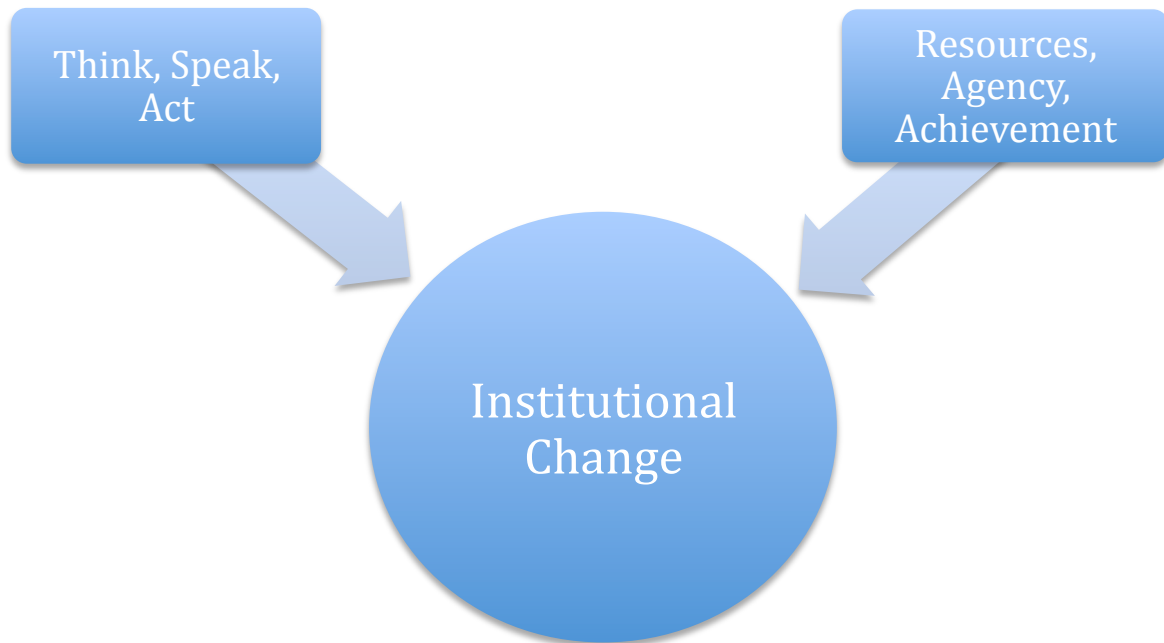


Figure B:
Institutional Change Framework
Source: Naila Kabeer, 1999; Vivian Schmidt, 2008.
Layout and reformulation: Loa Ingvarsdottir

4.0 Analytical Framework

Chapter four presents the analysis of the thesis on the process of change and how the ACCESS participants are acting upon their new knowledge. It begins by looking through the training the women received and connects that to the three different levels of changes which are considered and correlates with the three dimensions of power; resources, agency and achievement. Furthermore, the difference between the five villages is explored as well as the power of unity.

4.1 Program Activities

Different strategies have been undertaken by the program to raise awareness and inform women of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and to build capacity among women from the grass root level.

The activities that are carried out to meet the impacts of the program can be divided into two levels:

1) Grass root level: the beneficiaries, i.e. the women:

In each of the five villages, 20 women were invited to participate. These women have since the beginning of 2012 had a monthly meeting to establish a network where they can discuss their rights and share their experience. In addition, they come together for workshops on different issues. They have had training on:

- 1) Seed collection and preservation of them.
- 2) Income-generating activities' management.
- 3) Gender, rights and law.
- 4) Workshop with service provider and the women as service receiver, in relation to health, education and agriculture.
- 5) Yearly planning with pressure groups, to encourage the women to make a plan on what they would like to change and see changed in their lives and what kind of workshops they think they need to build their capacity. Discussion about savings and how the women can start creating their savings. Pressure group members are there to support them and help them to create this plan.

ACCESS participant 01: "We need to tell the others about what we learned in each workshop. It is good for us to talk about it" (group meeting on September 29, 2012).

ACCESS participant 02: "I like the meetings, there are nice discussions where the women can bring their own experience and stories into it" (group meeting on September 23, 2012).

For each workshop, five women from each group were chosen to participate (different five for each workshop). And as stated by one of the ACCESS participants, after each

workshop, those five women who participated are responsible for informing other group members about what they learned in the previous workshop and discuss how they can relate to this new knowledge. This way the women are made responsible for sharing the knowledge to increase the participatory part of the program. Through this approach the women are able to build up their confidence and strength and become more independent and capable of taking care of their own affairs.

No intervention, no matter how well it is constructed and carried out, can automatically guarantee to empower women, as many factors outside the scope of the intervention, such as context and capacity, will always influence the results and it is hard to predict on an intervention's true impact on the participants and how it really will play out in practice. Nonetheless, with a successful and well thought through intervention, there is much potential to bring about social transformation and increase women's agency (Kabeer, 2005; 2011). For the potentials of successful intervention to be high it is pivotal to make the actors themselves as responsible as possible to increase the possibility that they claim their rights and find the courage within them to use their new knowledge to move forward in the way that improves their well-being. The importance of strengthening and increasing women's capacity is also undisputed in the fight for equality and empowerment of marginalized people (Kabeer, 2010).

2) Supportive level:

This level focuses on women's environment and how their surroundings can also be activated and their awareness increased. That includes initiating lobbying and advocacy to implement existing laws and policies. To activate the union level, NGO workers and other powerful people in the society, such as religious leaders, committee members, village leaders and other government personnel support women and help them to be able to claim their rights. At the supportive level the following activities are carried out:

- Quarterly meetings with group members' spouses
- Pressure groups formulated to be supportive to the women groups
- Stop Violence Against Women (NNPC) group formulated to support the women
- Meeting for Union level personnel, discussion on women rights

Pressure groups are formulated with a mixture of people that can influence their society; Union level personnel, religious leaders, human rights advocates, village leaders, teachers and medical representatives and respected elite persons in the district.

Interviewer: "Does it matter that influential people in the community are participating in the form of pressure groups and showing their support for this cause?"

ACCESS participant 03: "Yes, very much. If the people in my village see that elite respectable people are talking about women's rights and lobbying for it, it is more likely other people will approve of it and agree" (group meeting on September 23, 2012).

As the ACCESS participant explained, hierarchy is very strong in the Bangladeshi culture and elite persons are very highly admired and looked up to (SUS, 2012; Mita et al, 1994) and it is thus very important and influential to have respected people in the community working with the program and showing they support women's increased rights. As mentioned above by one of ACCESS participants, the support of this group by elite persons in the district plays a tremendous role and influences how other people view these matters and help people to be more open-minded.

Quarterly all the participant's spouses were convened to a meeting or a workshop on diverse matters in relation to women's rights with a discussion on how everyone can benefit by respecting women's right and activating women in the social, economical and political sectors.

Interviewer: "Did all husbands go to the spouses meetings and participate?"

ACCESS program coordinator: "Yes, all of the husbands go to the meetings but some of them are not happy about it and just sit in the back and do not participate at all. They feel these meetings are unnecessary and do not understand the purpose of it. There is no reason for things to change, they feel. The wives have their roles and responsibilities, which should not change."

Interviewer: "Why do those husbands, who feel this way, go to the meetings at all?"

ACCESS program coordinator: "They feel the pressure from the group, if one husband is not going to attend the meeting, few of us go and talk to him and tell him he should go. Also, I think it plays a role that SUS is a respectable organization in the district and there is social pressure to attend what the organization invites them to participate in. In Bangladesh, group pressure plays a big role/.../if the majority of the husbands are going to the meeting it is likely that the others feel the pressure to go as well" (interview on October 3, 2012).

According to the ACCESS program coordinator, all husbands of the participants attend the spouses meetings, even though not everyone likes to. This can be explained by a social pressure on them to attend the meetings despite their unwillingness to do so. According to Kabeer, some husbands who are less open for change can still be susceptible to change if the information and knowledge can be presented in the right way to them. If they are to learn how they themselves can benefit from allowing their wives to have more freedom to mobilize they can become more willing to do so. For example, if they realize how they can increase their collective income if they allow their wife to go work part-time or to grow a garden for example (Kabeer, 2002; Steen, 2012).

4.2 The Power of Knowledge

When looking into the data to see if and how the women are exercising their rights and implementing this new knowledge they have received, three different types of change or behavior among the participants can be captured. This can be identified when the women became aware of their rights and were trying to change their identities to bring about change to their lives. What happens when they learn that the world is not as fixed as they thought is that some grasp the change immediately, while others need more time to adjust to this new knowledge. In all five villages, same patterns could be identified from the women’s reactions and answers. To analyze those patterns, three different groups were created to capture the different level of change, since all the women could represent some subtle change within their minds but in different levels. One can exercise its right through thinking, another through speaking and the third one through acting. Before people can act on their rights they might need to begin by thinking about it in the process of their education, then speak about it, speak about if they have rights and how they can exercise them and then lastly to act upon this new knowledge and learn to exercise their rights (Schimdt, 2008; Steen, 2011).



Figure: C
Institutional Change
Source: Vivian Schmidt, 2008
Layout: Loa Ingvarsdottir

Act, for those women who seemed to be acting differently since they started in the ACCESS program. *Speak*, for those women who seemed to be speaking differently and finally, *think*, for those women who seem to be thinking differently since they started in the program. Of all the women interviewed, equally many could be categorized into each group, that is to say the rate of women categorized in each group was very similar.

In the group of *thinking* differently, were those women categorized who were realizing they had rights, they were not aware of before, but did not fully realize how they would exercise those rights and also to do that without facing considerable consequences or sanctions. *Speaking* differently, is the group of women who could now speak about their rights and speak and discuss with other women how they could exercise the right they knew they had. *Acting* differently, is the group of women who were exercising their rights and acting upon their rights after receiving the training. They had the agency to do things they would not and did not do before.

4.2.1 Thinking differently

The first group categorized as *thinking* includes women who were starting to think differently regarding their rights after they started participating in the program without taking it further. They seemed to have in most cases narrow-minded husbands and/or family (mother-in-law) who did not want things to change and did not understand what really justified spending valuable working time going to meetings and workshops offered by the program.

ACCESS participant 04: "First my husband did not agree, I was not allowed to go to the ACCESS meetings. My husband says, "What is empowerment? We do not need that". In the end he allowed me to meet the other women, but I am not allowed to speak about what I learn with him"(group meeting on September 29, 2012).

As the ACCESS participant explained, all the women got permission to go the meetings, but it was difficult for many of them. Their living situation did not create space for change or development in their lives. The women were often withdrawn and spoke less in the meetings. In the individual interviews they all expressed that they were happy being a part of the program and that they wanted to continue. Socially they were gaining

a lot by realizing that other women were facing similar problems and they were able to talk about feelings they had never talked about before. There was a unity in the group and they now had access to this new support network, which was very valuable to them.

However, it was evident how this group of women was more concerned or afraid of losing the little they had by provoking the situation than the other two groups. The education shed light on what rights they have and now when they were aware of their rights they felt at the same time stuck in their situation. Thus, this situation has created some frustration among them, as they do not see how they can or will be able to break out of this old pattern. They did not know before that they had rights, which now they do, but they also realize that they cannot exercise them without facing some sanctions or consequences. For this group of women, it felt as the sanctions for provoking the system can be very costly for them because even though they know they do not have a good life and that their lives could easily be better, they would still jeopardize the little they had. Chwdhuri was one of those women who would be classified in that category. She is only 24 years and has four children. She was 13 years old when she had her first child. Her husband is much older than her and very dominant and Chwdhuri's mother-in-law is very dominant as well.

Translator in a low voice: "Her mother-in-law is listening to everything she is saying. She is worried that Chwdhuri will say something that will besmirch the family's reputation and she is not happy about Chwdhuri giving this interview" (interview on September 26, 2012).

Chwdhuri's mother-in-law was eavesdropping behind a wall, trying to listen to everything Chwdhuri was saying. Due to this we decided to move the interview to another location. However, as I noticed how afraid she was of her mother-in-law and was uncomfortable speaking about this issue, the interview was cut short in order to not jeopardize Chwdhuri's safety any further.

Chwdhuri tells us her story:

Chwdhuri: "Even though things have not changed a lot for me personally after I started participating in the program I still feel better. I am not as lonely and do not feel as much alone. It is nice to meet the other women and talk about our lives".

“My husband did not want me to participate in the group in the beginning but later he allowed me to go.”

Interviewer: “Do you discuss with your husband what you learn in the meetings and the workshops?”

Chwdhuri: “No, I would never do that. I am not allowed to speak about that with him.”

Interviewer: “Are you free to mobilize?”

Chwdhuri: “No, my aunt was getting married and my husband did not allow me to go to the wedding” (interview on September 26, 2012).

As noted by Chwdhuri, she appreciates to be a part of this group and she gains socially by meeting the group and experiencing the support. However, with her husband not being open to change and seems in many ways reticent to allow his wife to develop and become more independent, that will affect how much Chwdhuri will be able to further increase her agency. In the beginning he said that she could not go, but Chwdhuri was able to settle for permission with her husband to attend the meetings, which is a signal of some power she has. Nonetheless, she does not dare to discuss any of the things she learns in the meetings and what she discusses with the other women. This can be anticipated in a culture where the men are the main bread winners and women are not expected to be independent. An access to income for the women or increased knowledge of their rights could be seen by the husbands as something that could have the effect on the wives to become insubordinate to their husbands which would threaten their male dominance and can therefore be met with resistance from the husbands and stand in the way of change (Kabeer, 2011).

According to Sheela Francis, it can be very hard and it takes a long time to bring in new ideology and change women’s view on things after a certain age, especially after they get married and have learned and adopted a certain kind of behavior and values on how women should not be equal to men. The women are brought up believing it and therefore it makes it very hard to change that later on, particularly when there is little room for manoeuvre for that in their homes (Francis, 2013). Some people can be loyal to institutions for the reason of emotional attachment, particularly in a patriarchal environment like Bangladesh can be considered to be. The basis of people’s actions can be related to this attachment (Schmidt, 2008). Nonetheless, this group of women still has some bargaining power because they had to negotiate with their husbands to get the permission to be a part of the ACCESS program. For instance, many mentioned that their

husbands did not allow them to participate in the beginning, but in the end they did, albeit they do not fully approve or see the point of it because at this point in their households they do not intend to change anything. The change is therefore very subtle on this stage and can involve the women doing the same thing in a different way or learning to do things that can make their lives a little bit easier, although it does not necessarily mean increased rights for them or change what they can do and what they cannot do.

However, Kabeer (1999) does not look at *doing the same in a different way* or doing more of the same thing as achievement. In her framework where she looks at how resources can create new agency is when the agency is used to act upon the new knowledge by breaking out of the old pattern and doing different things. She looks at it as achievement when the new agency is used to act in a way to improve your life with strategic achievement that means thinking out of the box and reaching beyond the gender norms which can better be achieved among the women in the *thinking* and *acting* categories. Whether you achieve your goal or not, the fact that the actor is willing to act and risk what was there before is in Kabeer's mind an achievement on its own (Kabeer, 1999).

4.2.2 Speaking differently

The second category is *speaking* differently and the women classified in that group all had in common that they were beginning to speak differently from the time they started the program up until now. They were more aware of their rights and were exercising them, still in a careful way and in incremental steps. They were slowly adopting the language of rights.

Libon is 25 years old, married and has one daughter. She is an example of a woman who is starting to speak differently. She has a husband who is relatively open-minded or at least he sees what he and they as a family can gain from allowing his wife to have more freedom. For instance, he bought a used sewing machine for his wife and now for the last few months Libon has started to sew for the people in her village and is able to bring in income to the household. Libon feels more confident in speaking her mind than before.

Libon tells us her story:

“Now I feel I can go to my daughter’s school and discuss with the teachers or the school administration if any problem come up regarding my daughter’s education. Before I would not have done that. Perhaps I would have asked my husband to go to the school, but he is often very busy and did not have the time for that” (interview on October 20, 2012).

Libon’s story demonstrates how she is now beginning to feel more independent and confident to speak when she feels she needs to speak and therefore can well be categorized in the *speaking* group.

Another example of a woman categorized in the *speaking* group is Dalia. She is 19 years old and was married when she was 14 years old. The unusual thing about her is that she only has one daughter and does not plan to have more children. A few months ago she got the opportunity to go to a sewing course and has started to work for three to four days a week. Her mother lives close by and can take care of Dalia’s daughter while she works.

Dalia tells us her story:

Interviewer: “Why did you want to participate in the ACCESS program?”

Dalia: “I wanted to become more aware of myself, become strong and learn about the consequences of child marriage.”

Interviewer: “How does your husband feel about you participating in the ACCESS program?”

Dalia: “He is step by step more improving and becoming more positive. After I got the job and my earnings he is happier. We prosper more and he honors me more and emphasizes me more. He is nicer. Now I can talk to him about what I learn at the workshops. Before the training I did not know how to discuss with him, now I know it better” (interview on September 25, 2012).

Dalia’s story indicates how her husband is gradually accepting changes and is more willing to allow his wife to grow. He seems to appreciate her more and has realized how he can also benefit from his wife’s increased agency. Dalia can be categorized in the *speaking* group as she is both willing and able to speak differently. Now she can speak about her rights and she uses her improved agency to improve her life. In Dalia’s case, it is evident how outer circumstances in her life affect how she is able to move forward.

4.2.3 Acting differently

The third category is *acting* differently and consists of those women participating in the group who are acting differently now compared to how they acted before they started in the program. The types who fall under this definition all have similar characteristics in common; they are outspoken and seem to have, in general, more confidence than the others. They could in some cases be seen as the leaders of their group or at least show strong leadership skills by keeping the group together and giving great support to the others. They were taking the initiative to gather the group together for a meeting, offering their home to be a meeting place and taking initiatives in helping women neighbors that were not strong enough to speak for themselves, like some of the stories below demonstrate. They often gave the group a voice and helped the others who were speaking less by speaking first and then encouraging them to speak their minds. The women categorized in the group of *acting* differently are courageous and well aware of their rights and dare to provoke and change what has been a strong part of their culture before. However, they also often had a husband or a family that was more open-minded than the others, making it easier for them to take those new steps of change. The husbands were able to see how they could also benefit from allowing their wives to have more freedom. These women vary in age and some were married and some not, some had many children and others only a few or even none at all. Jharna is one of those who is categorized in the *acting* group. She is 40 years old, married and has four children, one of which is a disabled daughter who has a son of her own. Jharna has therefore had to care for her grandchild as well. Her husband is relatively open-minded, however he was skeptical towards the program in the beginning and he did not see the purpose of it and why he should allow his wife to take part. However, Jharna like many other participants convinced her husband to allow her to participate in this program. Today Jharna has become very active in her community. She speaks her mind and has noticed that she has a voice which can be heard. She has also noticed that after she started to speak up for herself and for others who are disadvantaged, she has regained more respect, both from her husband, but also from the people in her community. She is concerned about others who do not have the courage to speak like she has now and she is getting involved in the community politics and participates in many different committees.

Jharna tells us her story:

Interviewer: "Have you experienced any change in your life since you started participating in ACCESS?"

Jharna: "I never thought I would become a candidate for the community politics, but for the last few months I have learned that I have a message to bring further and I can do it and I need to do it because I want to help to improve the living situation and be a representative for the poor and marginalized people in my community. Now I am preparing myself to run in the next elections."

Jharna continues: "Before I joined the program my husband did not respect me, now after I began to speak about women's rights my husband's attitude has changed towards me and he respects me more. I still ask him for permission when I need to go somewhere, but now he also asks me for permission before he goes somewhere out of respect. He did not do that before" (interview on October 1, 2012).

The fact that Jharna is now preparing herself, as she explains above, to become a candidate for the Union Parishad (lowest tier of regional administration of the local government in Bangladesh) elections, is a good example of a person who is categorized in the *acting* group; someone who is able to truly act upon her new knowledge and use what she learned in the program and to take it further and become active in her society. Especially since this is something she did not even allow herself to dream about not so long ago. She uses her resources to increase her agency, resulting in a great achievement for her individually, but also for her society as whole. Jharna stroke me as a courageous and very bright woman, who has strong leadership skills. She did not have the chance to go to school, but she has a husband that is willing to allow her to grow and become the person she has the potential to be. Alas, not all women in Bangladesh have this potential and that demonstrates well how abstract institutional change can be and how multifaceted and complex, and in fact, how dependent it is on many different factors.

Another example of a woman categorized in the *acting* group is Naym, who is only 21 years old, does not have any children and is not married (which is very unusual among women at that age in the rural areas and can be considered a shame by many, rooted in their culture and religion). She is one of a few participants who is literate and still goes to school and has had the chance to participate in many different courses. She is an example of a young woman that is very brave and aware of her rights. She is also quite lucky for having had the chance to study. Nonetheless, she has had to fight for her rights. Her parents wanted to marry her off when she was 14 years old, but she convinced them

to postpone it and fortunately they agreed. Since she joined the program and learned more about the laws in the country (for instance that girls need to be 18 to get married and boys 20) and about the terrible consequences that early marriage can have on young girls. She now feels confident to speak to others about how important it is to postpone early marriage of girls.

Naym tells us her story:

Naym: "There was a 12 year old girl here in the village that I heard was going to be married to an older man. I knew that was not right and I wanted to do what I could to stop it. Another woman from the ACCESS program went with me to visit this family. We tried to tell the parents of all the consequences of child marriage and how this would most likely reduce the quality of their daughter's life."

Interviewer: "Were the parents willing to listen to you?"

Naym: "Not at first, we had to go to there several times but in the end they started to realize that this would not be of the best interest for their daughter and they decided to wait a few years at least" (interview on September 25, 2012).

Early girl marriage has been very rooted in Bangladesh and been a part of the religious culture as well and is still quite common in many rural areas of the country. Because of Naym's courage, which is demonstrated in her story, this young girl is now allowed to continue to go to school and to be the child she is, at least for a little bit longer. Naym's story is well reflected in what Amartya Sen has said that women are increasingly being seen as the "active agents of change", that is the "dynamic promoters of social transformation" that have the power to bring about change which can "alter the lives of both women and men" (Sen, 1999:188). The fact that Naym was able to go and that she had the courage to speak to this family more than once and twice demonstrates how she is able to act upon her knowledge and use her resources and agency to achieve something new. She is therefore a good example of a woman categorized in the *acting* group. Naym was able to achieve her goal in this case, but as Kabeer sees achievement in the sense of using agency to bring to their action is not only when one really achieves something, but also, and furthermore, when a person becomes willing to attempt to change things, whether they are successful or not. The fact that a person begins to use its

agency is an achievement in itself because that alone can mean scarifications (Kabeer, 1999).

4.3 Agency – Social Awareness

It was interesting to note how the women were not only using this increased agency to improve their own lives, but also and not the least by helping others in their community. Through the power of unity they felt they had the responsibility to respond when they learn about any cases of unfairness regarding deprived girls or women.

Tasriba tells us the story of the safety card:

“In each village two disabled persons have the right to receive a safety network card from the government. The persons who receive this card are entitled to a payment in the amount of 300 BDT (about 30 SEK) per month. The problem is that very few people know about these rights in the rural areas and especially in the small villages. In addition, it is not easy for people to go and claim these rights, as the laws seem to be not fully implemented. It requires advocacy and often takes more than one time to be granted these rights. The women participating in the ACCESS program are learning about their rights and how they can and should claim them. Few women from the group in the Baluakanda village took the initiative to inform two disabled women of their rights and helped them to apply for this card. They went with these women and advocated for their rights. Eventually those disabled women were approved and were granted the safety card and now receive this payment monthly. Through ACCESS not only the women participating in the program are becoming more aware of their rights, but also they spread the knowledge and the whole community gains from it” (interview on September 26, 2012).

This story, as well as the story of the early girl marriage that was prevented, indicates how the group’s social awareness is getting stronger and how the group is also beginning to act upon knowledge as a unity. A single person could be willing to attempt a certain thing, but as a group they are willing to attempt more to change things. Together they feel stronger and can act for those who are not strong enough to speak for themselves.

Kishoar tells us another story that demonstrates well how the women are starting to think in terms of society and helping each other out:

“In the next village there is a man who is married and about one year ago he married his second wife. His new wife is disabled and is now pregnant expecting her first child. Now the husband does not want anything to do with his new wife and does not support her or take care of her. He ignores her and her needs and she is not capable of taking care of herself as she is both pregnant and disabled.

Me and one other woman in the ACCESS program have decided to go and talk to the husband and let him know that we feel he has obligations towards his pregnant wife. We are going to try to convince him to take better care of her as that is his duty and responsibility” (interview on October 1, 2012).

As both stories above illustrate, a social awareness is awakening among the women through increased agency and power of unity that has been created within the groups. The women become more aware and conscious of the difference between justice and injustice and feel the urge to act upon that. Kabeer, in her research on women’s empowerment, explains that when a group of women go and discuss a matter to a man, in a social setting such as rural Bangladesh, he realizes that other people know of his actions that can make him feel embarrassed and ashamed. He realizes that his wife has this new discussion platform and that his actions are no longer restricted to their private domain, but could be discussed among a group of women. This can make him both even more restricted to allow his wife to meet this group and also make him vulnerable to what the society thinks of him and therefore could evolve to enforcing him to change his actions (Kabeer, 2011).

This power of unity, which is illustrated in both the stories above, was also found in Andersson’s and Gabrielsson’s study, *Because of poverty, we had to come together: collective action for improved food security in rural Kenya and Uganda*, where their findings showed how improved livelihood security could be accomplished as people realized how much they gain by coming together, helping each other out, sharing the risk and becoming aware of the power of unity and social awareness and how their own capacity could be strengthened through the strategy of *community of practise* (Andersson and Gabrielsson, 2012; Wegner, 2006).

4.4 Five Different Villages

The overall settings in all the villages were similar; living standards, rural, poor and marginalized. Many husbands are day laborers (day laborer refers to a worker who goes out in the morning and hopes to be picked out and hired for the day. The work can vary

from construction work to any farm labor work). This brings a great amount of uncertainty into the household income and often makes it difficult to those households to earn money for food.

Two of the villages were Muslim and three of them were Hindu communities. The different form of religion did not affect how the women perceived their living situation or thoughts and feelings about increased education and awareness of their rights, as the same characteristics could be found in all five groups and very similar answers and discussion took place in all five villages.

An example from a Hindu village:

Interviewer: "What are the main hindrances women in your village face?"

ACCESS participant 05 in a Hindu village: "We have no mobility right. The men decide and control where and when we can go somewhere" (group meeting on September 29, 2012).

ACCESS participant 06 in a Hindu village: "Men do not respect women because women are financially dependent on men. They say you are depended on me and should do as I tell" (group meeting on September 29, 2012).

An example from a Muslim village:

Interviewer: "What are the main hindrances women in your village face?"

ACCESS participant 07 in a Muslim village: "Freedom, to be free to mobilize, as we need and want. I always need to get permission from my husband, he dominates me. If I want go somewhere I would not dare to go without a permission" (group meeting on October 3, 2012).

ACCESS participant 08 in a Muslim village: "We need income to be more independent" (group meeting on October 3, 2012).

These examples demonstrate the similarities between the villages when it comes to their views on the women's main hindrances. Cultural norms in regards to freedom and equality and issues that affect the women's well-being are similar.

However, one village was different by some means, i.e. the Faluakanda village and the main reason for that has to do with the fact that in this village many male residents were addicted to drugs and gambling. Due to this fact, theft rates were high and many families

face deeper difficulties feeding their families. The little earning the families had were lost on drugs or gambling.

Raunak tells us her story:

“All my money was stolen by a boy in the village who is a drug user, there is no way for me to get that money back. We are never safe, our belongings can always be taken away from us. I know who stole my money and I know he has already spent it on drugs. If the situation continues to stay this way in our village we will not be able to move forward. This is our main problem” (group meeting on October 3, 2012).

As can be noted in Raunak’s story, she and the women in this village were not as optimistic regarding the future as the other groups. They did not experience as much increased power with increased knowledge like the other groups which demonstrates well the correlation between increased resources and the possibilities influencing increased agency, as Kabeer emphasizes in her framework (1999). However, they did feel safer and better now that they were meeting as a group, sharing their worries and problems and being a part of this newly created network. They had not done that before and that gave them resolve and in the interviews they mentioned that after they joined the program they did not feel as afraid of the drug users as before. Nonetheless, they still felt this would always affect their lives and possibilities of improvement and were afraid the situation would continue to stay *status quo* and this situation would always have an enormous effect on their lives and hinder them moving forward if the situation would not improve.

In this case there are fewer opportunities for increased agency for the women, which affect their overall achievement possibilities. The case of this village again demonstrates well how abstract and complex institutional change is and how various factors will always play a big role in the process of it. However, despite all the additional problems the women in this village had to deal with, this group still had the same types of women who could be categorized within the *thinking* differently group, *speaking* differently group or the *acting* differently group.

4.5 In Summary

As institutions can be seen as being the “silent patterns of social interactions” (Aoki, 2005) it is evident that different aspects of institutions will always continue to “be in the process of change” (Kabeer, 1999). However, this change can be very slow and gradual and therefore can often be hard to notice directly. Discursive change starts on the thinking stage and can be subtle but evident when closely examined (Schmidt, 2008).

In the actors stories’ above it is possible to identify how the institutional change has started in incremental stages to occur. Many of the participants have realized how they have to grasp the new agency, this new dimension of power and bring about themselves the change in their lives through new achievements that can help them improve their life (Kabeer, 2002). Reflecting on the interviews, my findings show that among all the women I spoke to, some change could be identified, but on different stages. I was able to categorize the women into three different groups, i.e. thinking differently, speaking differently and acting differently. Thus, education, increased knowledge and awareness of one’s rights where capabilities are strengthened are essential for increased equality and can be the stepping stone towards institutional change. However, as mentioned before, institutional change is extremely abstract and a vast number of various factors will always play their part and influence this process (Kabeer, 2011).

Circumstances have to be ready to welcome the change in order for it to happen. Individuals also have to be ready to dare to risk the little they have while demanding for things to improve and challenge the existing situation and the injustice they have endured. It is therefore hard to predict to the outcome of an intervention and there is no one formula that can guarantee a change in people’s lives to happen and for their lives to improve. Opportunities and possibilities for change need to be in place, but in the end it depends on the individual’s choice and how far one is willing to move. The impacts and the consequences that the actors (the women) face can be multifarious and difficult (Kabeer, 2002). However, successful intervention towards increased awareness of rights has all the potentials to bring about gradual change towards increased justice. My findings also show that institutional change can be discursive and start on a *thinking* level and can move from there to a *speaking* level and finally to an *acting* level.

This incremental change is also marked by Steen in her study on the dynamics of the gender regime of land and labour rights. She found an “emerging change in the thinking and speaking against polygyny” among women she spoke to and considers “thinking and

talking as a way to initiate an institutional change in the institution of polygyny” (Steen, 2011:166).

In addition, my findings show how the women became much more aware of their society and the people around them who did not have the capability to stand up for themselves. Through the training, a unity was created making the women able to see themselves as a group and the importance of supporting each other through a *community of practice* and noticing how they all became stronger through this unity (Wegner, 2006).

5.0 To Conclude – *A Light in the Dark*

Chapter five is the closing chapter of this study where the findings are summarized, the research question answered and conclusions are drawn.

This research explores the relationship between new knowledge and increased awareness of one’s rights to action and asked *how the women participating in the ACCESS program in Netrakona in Bangladesh were acting upon their newly gained knowledge in terms of social and institutional change.*

In the first part of my analysis I have argued that discursive institutional change can occur in incremental steps through the three different stages of *thinking, speaking* and *acting*. This change is nonetheless very influential on various other factors which will always affect this process. Through the training, the women get access to knowledge and resources that have the potentials to improve their lives, but the power dimension of those new resources depend on the participants’ outer circumstances, as well as their own strength to use their new agency to push improvements through achievements in their lives. For some of the women, their gender norms had changed and improved but that was not the case for all of the women. All of the women had experienced some change but in different stages and those women categorized in the *acting* differently group had experienced the biggest change and the women categorized in the *thinking* differently group had experienced the smallest change, but still they had experienced some change which gave them hope.

In the second part of my analysis, findings show how the power of unity creates stronger network and how the women themselves realized how their strength increases and they get more influential by working together and supporting each other. By

working together and seeing themselves as *a unity* they increased their potential agency power and how they were viewed by their society.

This intervention therefore proves to be in many ways successful as well as effective, although it is dependent on other factors and does not stand alone. It has all the potentials to contribute to increased equality, especially when considered in the context of the country. Bangladesh is one of the difficult cases when it comes to patriarchal issues and gender equality, where the large cultural barriers and social structure have been preventing (female) empowerment to take place. Despite that, gender equality is moving in the right direction, though it moves at a slow pace. There are aspects which will remain to be uncertain in this regard but still the future is full of potentials. "*The drop makes the stone hollow*", an old Icelandic proverb, perhaps describes this situation and my results aptly.

For future research, many angles would be interesting to investigate further, in terms of coming back to the same group of women, now that the program has fully been implemented and after the women have been receiving training for over a year and they have had more time to digest the information they have received and think about how it will affect their capability in translating it to their own reality. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate and explore if similarities can be found in other districts and furthermore in the neighboring countries.

Now, while the women are participating in the program they have much incentive to use their agency and translate it to their lives. However, when the program is over and things go back to "normal" it is hard to predict if the changes have become established enough and the women will be able to continue to maintain their new power. Therefore it might be interesting to go back to the group in a few years and investigate further how and if they have succeeded in maintaining and further developing their new agency. Due to the structure of the formulation of the groups and the geographical benefits, strong networks have been created which make it more likely that the group networks will be sustainable after SUS has backed out and the groups will still be able to continue to meet and support each other.

Clearly, there is a light in the dark. Sometimes you can hardly see it but then it steadily increases and sometimes it becomes very bright. I sincerely hope that the light will shine brightly over the women in Bangladesh.

References

- Andersson E. & Gabriellsson, S. (2012), *Because of poverty, we had to come together: collective action for improved food security in rural Kenya and Uganda*. International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability. Taylor & Francis.
- Aoki, M. (2005), *Endogenizing Institutions and Institutional Change*. Stanford University.
[http://www.stanford.edu/~aoki/papers/JOIE\(Final\).pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/~aoki/papers/JOIE(Final).pdf) [28 January, 2013].
- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2009), Report on welfare monitoring survey – 2009.
<http://www.bbs.gov.bd> [20 October, 2012].
- Begley, C. (1996), *Triangulation of communication skills in qualitative research instruments*. Blackwell Science Ltd, Journal of Advanced Nursing, 24, 688 – 693.
- Bogdan, R. (1992), *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Models*. Allyn & Bacon.
<https://francescoianni.com/~frances4/Digital%20Portfolio/pdf%20files/EDU7900%20Qualitative%20Research%20for%20Education.pdf> [14 February, 2013].
- Bryman, A. (2008), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J. (2007), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- Francis, S. (2013), Women's Collective in Tamil Nadu, India. Interviewed by: Loa Ingvarsdottir (24 January, 2013).
- Human Rights Watch (2011), *World Report 2011: Bangladesh*.
<http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2011/bangladesh> [6 October, 2012].
- Kabeer, N. (2011), *Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Navigating Pathways of Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice in Rural Bangladesh*. Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.

Kabeer, N. (2010), *Women's Empowerment, Development Interventions and the Management of Information Flows*. Vol. 41, 105 – 113.

Kabeer, N. (2005), *Is Microfinance a 'Magic Bullet' for Women's Empowerment?* *Economic & Political Weekly*. Vol. XL. No. 44 – 45. October 29, 2005.

<http://www.epw.in/review-womens-studies/microfinance-magic-bullet-womens-empowerment.html> [28 January, 2013].

Kabeer, N. (2002), *Discussing Women's Empowerment: Theory and Practice*. Volume 3 of Sida studies. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

Kabeer, N (1999), *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*. *Development and Change*. Vol. 30, 435-464.

http://josiah.berkeley.edu/2007Fall/ER275/Readings/DP3/kabeer-dev_ch-99.pdf
[28 January, 2013].

Kabir, K. Director of Nijera Kori Organization, Interviewed by: Loa Ingvarsdottir (16 September, 2012).

Koenig, M., Saifuddin, A., Hossain, M.B and Mozumder, K. (2003), *Women's Status and Domestic Violence in Rural Bangladesh: Individual- and Community Level Effects*. *Demography*, Vol. 40, no. 2, May 2003, pp. 269-288. Population Association of America.

Kulawik, T. (2009), *Staking the Frame of a Feminist Discursive Institutionalism*. *Politics and Gender*. Vol. 5, no. 2.

Mahoney, J. & Thelen, K. (2010), *A theory of gradual institutional change*. In: Mahoney, J. & Thelen, K. (eds.) *Explaining institutional change: ambiguity, agency and power*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Mikkelsen, B. (2005), *Methods for Development Work and Research*, (Second Edition). A New Guide for Practitioners. London: Sage.
- Mitra, S., Ali, M., Islam, S., Cross, A. and Saha, T. (1994), *Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, 1993–1994*. Calverton, MD and Dhaka, Bangladesh: National Institute for Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, and Macro International, Inc.
- Ragin, C. & Amoroso, L. (2011), *Constructing Social Research, The Unity and Diversity of Method*. Sociology For A New Century. Sage
- Scheyvens, R. & Storey, D. (2003), *Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide*, Sage Publication, London.
- Schmidt, V. (2008) *Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse*. Department of International Relations, Boston University.
- Sen, A. (1999), *Development As Freedom*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Silverman, D. (1985), *Qualitative methodology and sociology: describing the social world*, The University of California.
- Silverman, D. (2010), *Doing qualitative research*, London: Sage.
- Steen, K. (2011), *Time to farm: a qualitative inquiry into the dynamics of the gender regime of land and labour rights in subsistence farming: an example from the Chiweshe communal area, Zimbabwe*. Ph.D., Lund University.
- Sultana, N. (2012), ACCESS program coordinator. Interviewed by: Loa Ingvarsdottir (3 October, 2012).
- SUS (2012), Annual Report 2011, Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS). April, 2012.

The Swallows India Bangladesh (2012), Half Yearly Progress Report. Thanapara Swallows Development Society (TSDS), Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) and Nijera Kori.

UNDP (2011), Human Development Report, Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All.

http://www.gm.undp.org/HDR_2011_EN_Complete.pdf [October 6, 2012].

UNICEF (2009), Child and Maternal Nutrition in Bangladesh.

[http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Child and Maternal Nutrition\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/Child_and_Maternal_Nutrition(1).pdf) [October 6, 2012]

Wegner, E. (2006), *Community of Practice, a brief introduction*, June 2006.

<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/> [28 January, 2013].

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interviews with Participants

Chwdhuri, 2012. Personal Interview, 26 September.

Libon, 2012. Personal Interview, 20 October.

Dalia, 2012. Personal Interview, 25 September.

Jharna, 2012. Personal Interview, 1 October.

Naym, 2012. Personal Interview, 25 September.

Tasriba, 2012. Personal Interview, 26 September.

Kishoar, 2012. Personal Interview, 1 October.

Raunak, 2012. Personal Interview, 3 October.

Participant 01, 2012. Group meeting, 29 September.

Participant 02, 2012. Group meeting, 23 September.

Participant 03, 2012. Group meeting, 23 September.

Participant 04, 2012. Group meeting, 29 September.

Participant 05, 2012. Group meeting, 29 September.

Participant 06, 2012. Group meeting, 29 September.

Participant 07, 2012. Group meeting, 3 October.

Participant 08, 2012. Group meeting, 3 October.

Appendix 2: Abbreviations

HDI Human Development Index

NGO Non-Government Organization

NNPC Violence against women group

SUS Sabalamy Unnayan Samity

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Netrakona district, Bangladesh
Women participating in ACCESS program – with the aim to increase women's participation in social, political and economical spheres.

Interview # _____

Village: _____

Date: _____

Name: _____

Introduction:

- Explain who I am and the purpose of this research.
- Questions or comments before we start?

Background:

- Could you tell me a little about yourself and your family?
- How old are you and how many children do you have?
- What is your daily routine?
- How is the division of labour in your household?

ACCESS Program:

- Why did you join in the program?
- What have you learned?
- Do you feel it is helpful to you to be a part of the program? Would you like to continue?
- If you had to change anything or do differently in the program what would you change?
- What should be increased and decreased in the program activities?
- Has something changed in your live after you joined the program?
- How does your husband feel about you participating in the program?
- Did he immediately approve that you would join in it?

Women's situation:

- Under what circumstances would women's situation in rural Bangladesh improve?
- What will have to change in order for rural women to feel equal to men?
- Does it change anything to be more aware of your rights?
- What makes you smile?
- When do you feel sad?

Appendix 4: Map of the Netrakona District

