

# **‘Can buy me love’? Re-evaluating the empowerment potential of loans to women in rural Bangladesh**

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*‘I don’t care too much for money. Money can’t buy me love’* The Beatles, 1960s

*‘If they don’t give me proper credit, I just walk away.....’Cause the boy with the cold, hard cash is always Mr. Right...You know that we are living in a material world and I am a material girl’* Madonna, 1990s

*But if you don't have money in your hand, does anyone love you? Today, if you have 10,000/- in your hand, everyone will love you. Now that I bring in money, that I earn so much, won't my husband love me more? Did he love me before? Well, the difference between then and now is like day and night.* Female loanee, Small Enterprise Development Project, Bangladesh, 1997.

## **1. Introduction**

Credit programmes have become an increasingly important intervention for addressing poverty both in Bangladesh, and elsewhere, as a result of successive evaluations attesting to their important developmental benefits. The success of these programmes lies largely in the provision of subsidised access rather than of subsidised loans. Many charge the same rates of interest as the formal banking sector and have been able to use the funds raised to build their financial sustainability and institutional outreach. Through a strategy of direct lending or financial intermediation combined with reliance on group liability for loans in place of conventional collateral requirements which poor people can rarely fulfill, these programmes have ensured a supply of credit to those normally marginalised from the formal banking sector. They have consequently been credited with compensating for financial ‘market failure’, with reducing the reliance of the poor on usurious moneylenders and with enhancing the productivity of their livelihood efforts.. What has led to even greater interest in these programs is the documentation of the positive impacts associated with lending to poor women: both economic impacts in terms of poverty alleviation and higher repayment rates as well as more social ones to do with improvements in women’s position within family and society.

However, along with the highly positive claims made about the impact of credit on the lives of poor women and their families in Bangladesh, there have been recently a series of negative counter-claims suggesting that it is largely men who have benefitted from women's loans, because they have been able to use their socially-conferred power to control or to appropriate any new resource which enters the household. Consequently, not only is it denied that credit programmes have 'empowered' poor women, but also it is also contended that they may have been left even worse off. It was in response to these contradictory and polarised set of conclusions, generally about the same set of credit programmes, that I was commissioned by NORAD to evaluate the Small Enterprise Development Project (SEDP) for which they are the primary funders. NORAD was concerned to find out how it was possible to arrive at such conflicting conclusions regarding the impact of the same set of credit interventions and also to establish which set of findings were most applicable to the SEDP.

The aim of this paper is to present a critical review of these conflicting evaluations of the 'empowerment' potential of lending to women in order to establish whether these conflicts are empirical, conceptual or methodological in nature. I will be drawing on findings from my evaluation of the SEDP to assist in this analysis and to make a number of general points about the conceptualisation of empowerment, methodologies for evaluating it and organisational practices for promoting it.

## **2. Does access to credit 'empower' women: the evidence for a negative verdict**

There is now a fairly substantial body of studies seeking to evaluate the impact of loans on women's lives in Bangladesh and an exhaustive review is neither possible nor necessary here. Instead I will confine myself to deconstructing first a selection of 'negative', and then of 'positive', assessments in order to uncover the kinds of data they used, the findings they reported, the interpretations they gave to their findings and what all this tells us about the model of power on which the evaluation was based. The first of the negative evaluations I will be considering is by Goetz and Sen Gupta, (1994; 1996) and focuses on four credit organisations - Grameen Bank, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Thangemara Mahila Sebuji Sengstha and the government's Rural Poor Programme (BRDB-RD12) all of which lend small sums of money to predominantly, or significantly, to poor women, (80% of loanees in their study had borrowed less than 4000/- takas) and require weekly repayments. Data was collected on 253 loans to female borrowers from all four organisations and supplemented with evidence on 22 loans by male borrowers from BRAC.

Goetz and Sen Gupta utilised a single indicator of empowerment, an index of 'managerial control' which classified women loanees into five categories, ranging from those considered to exercise 'full control' over their loans, viz. women controlled the entire production process funded by the loan, including marketing of produce, at one end of the spectrum to those considered to exercise 'no control' at the other, ie. women who did not know how men had used their loans or else, where they did know how their loans had been used, had not themselves been involved in the productive process.

Marital status appears in their study to be the single most factor in explaining the extent of control women exercised over their loans: around 70% of the 13% of divorced, separated or widowed women in the sample exercised 'full' or 'significant' control over their loans while over 60% of married women who made up the remaining 87% of their sample exercised 'no', 'very limited' or 'partial' control. The strong correlation observed between negative rates of loan control and the presence of husbands was explained by, and indeed equated with, the 'male appropriation' of women's loans in the earlier version of the paper (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1994). A subsequent version (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996) allows for the possibility that loan transfers within the family could also be voluntary on the part of women and cautions against any assumption that 'individual control over a loan is equivalent to empowerment, nor does the phenomenon of transferring a loan in and of itself signal a loss of power for women' (p. 52). However, this is more than a trivial change of emphasis; it throws a very different light on how their findings on 'control' over loans is to be interpreted. First of all, it suggests that the authors do not have any direct information on either the rationales or the processes underlying the reported loan transfer so that their discussion in the latter version of their paper as to possible reasons for transfer has to be read as conjecture ie. 'explanations which suggest themselves' (p. 51) rather than a product of their empirical findings. This in turn means that there is no direct empirical basis from which to determine to what extent the 60% of cases of loan transfer classified as examples of 'partial', 'very limited' or 'no' control by women over their loans in fact represented cases of genuine loss of control by women and to what extent they represented voluntary or negotiated transfers.

A major source of interpretative confusion in the analysis by Goetz and Sen Gupta stems from the conceptual construction of their index of 'managerial control' which conflates what are in fact quite distinct concepts in the analysis of intra-household financial flows (Pahl, 1989). *Control* is exercised at the point at which money enters the household and concerns decisions to do with a policy making function, for instance, how the money is to be allocated, who will be responsible for ensuring this

allocation, the extent to which utilisation will be along individual or joint lines. *Management*, on the other hand, refers to decisions to do with the implementation function, putting into operation the particular policy decisions which have been adopted. The conflation of 'management' and 'control' in a single index by Goetz and Sen Gupta leads them to effectively focus on the implementation function, the management of the loan-funded enterprise, and to lose sight of the policy-making function. If, instead, more attention had been paid to how decisions about loan use were arrived at, rather than simply on who managed the loan-funded enterprise, they might have closer to measuring the actual extent of male appropriation of women's loans and hence women's actual exercise of control or loss of control. The value of their measure is further undermined by the fact they focus only on the main use of a single loan for each loanee; many women receive more than one loan and may use each loan quite differently. Consequently they would be classified quite differently in terms of an index of 'managerial control' depending on which loan was focused on. However, as will become clear from the subsequent discussion in this paper, the notion of 'control' is itself as elusive to measure as the notion of 'empowerment' in the context of intra-household relations which are premised on the ideology and reality of gender interdependence, however unequal the terms of this interdependence might be. To use an indicator of 'control' as a measure of women's empowerment in such contexts merely begs the question of how 'control' is to be measured.

Turning to the possible rationales for voluntary loan transfers which 'suggest themselves' to Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996), with the exception of the possibility that it might be a rational decision at the household level to invest women's loans in higher turnover and higher yielding male enterprises, what is striking is the extent to which their discussion reinforces the overall impression conveyed by their analysis that women exercised very little choice in the matter in loan use, even in these so-called voluntary transfers. The possibilities they suggest are that men are able to lay claim to women's loans because 'cash, ...especially in larger amounts, is more strongly culturally marked as a resource for men to control' (p. 51); that loan transfer by women was used as a strategy to preserve their marriages; as part of a trade-off in order to remain members of the credit organisation in question and access its other benefits; and as an exchange by women for 'the right' to have greater expenditures on their own or their children's clothing and health.

While loans to women, particularly married women, may be largely controlled by men, the authors suggest that women still bear the responsibility for ensuring the loan is repayed. Here

too a largely negative picture is painted of the consequences. Where the male family member using the loan takes responsibility for the repayment, the disjuncture between personal loan use and repayment responsibility this represents is seen as dissipating the development benefits of targeting loans to women. In other cases, the consequences are even more negative. Where husbands are unable to supply the requisite repayment funds, women loanees have to substitute funds from their 'expenditure-saving' activities, daily subsistence resources, sales of household utensils and from their savings in cash or kind. In those cases where husbands are *unwilling* to repay the loans, intensified tensions within the household occur, often spilling over into violence against women. Violence against women is also believed to have increased because of husbands' frustration in their wives' delay or failure in getting loans.

Given the very negative conclusions drawn about the impact of credit in women's lives, the policy recommendations coming out of this evaluation are a fairly 'maximalist' package of interventions, including more 'leadership training', and other forms of social development inputs, for women loanees; skills development to improve women's productivity and shift them out of traditional low-productivity 'female' activities, long-term investments in literacy and numeracy; and training to bring about attitudinal changes in men as well as women. Above all, however, facilities to enhance women's access to the market is put forward 'as the single most effective way of enhancing their control over loans, as well as their public presence and their self-confidence' (p. 59) and the authors suggest provision of transportation to take women to the market and security measures to protect women from physical assault, given the likelihood of male resistance to their presence in the market place.

A second example of a negative evaluation of the impact of credit for women's empowerment is by Montgomery et al (1996). Although they devote a very small section of their more general evaluation of two credit programmes in Bangladesh, including BRAC, to the question of women's empowerment impact, I have included it here because it exemplifies a particular understanding of gender relations and women's empowerment within the literature on Bangladesh. Montgomery et al argue that the provision of loans to women has done little to empower them since it 'encourages rather than contests the existing sexual division of labour' (p. 166) and suggest that the main effect of credit has been to increase the social status of women who receive loans vis-à-vis other less well-off women rather than in relation to men, either within their households or in the wider society.

These conclusions are derived partly from their reading of other negative evaluations and partly on findings from their survey of 156 male and female BRAC borrowers. According to this survey, 9% of first time female borrowers reported that they were primary managers of their loan-assisted activities while 87% described loan-assisted activities as a 'family partnership'. Among first-time male borrowers, 33% said that they had sole authority over the loan-assisted activity while 56% described it as a family partnership. In addition, Montgomery et al found that little change was reported by women borrowers in how cash holdings were handled before they had received loans and after. Around 25% of women reported keeping cash with themselves, both before and after taking a loan, while those reported pooled incomes went from 37% prior to taking a loan to 40% after. Nor did the pattern change much for male loanees as a result of taking loans: just over half reported keeping their cash themselves while the rest reported some form of pooled income. Both sets of findings are taken as evidence for a negative verdict on loan impact because both 'pooled income' and 'partnership' enterprises are taken to be disguised forms of male authority. Based on this analysis, Montgomery et al conclude that while female loans may have increased cash flow into the household, the absence of change in the gender division of labour and assets and in the management of cash suggests that the flow has been through male hands and may indeed have *strengthened* male control within the household. Consequently, while there may be heightened recognition of women's contribution to joint household welfare within the family, they suggest that any change in women's status is likely to be limited. They also note considerable stresses generated by peer group pressure to avoid default on loans by any of their members since this can threaten the group's future creditworthiness. Persistent defaulters face the possibility that their assets (livestock purchased with the loan or household utensils) may be seized and sold off by their other group members to meet repayment obligations.

Ackerly's evaluation of the impact of credit programmes for women also stresses market access as the route to women's empowerment. It is based on a study of 826 loans by 613 female borrowers (ie. allowing for more than one loan per borrower) from 3 organisations: BRAC, Grameen Bank and Save the Children(USA) Bangladesh's field office. She points out that the 'empowerment' of women is a frequently presumed impact of credit interventions, and while it is never precisely defined, there is an 'ideal-typical' scenario as to how such impact is likely to be manifested: "Empowered", the borrower wisely invests money in a successful enterprise, her husband stops beating her, she sends her children to school, she improves the health and nutrition of her family, and she participates in major family decisions' (p. 56).

Since this 'empowerment' cannot itself be directly measured, she uses 'accounting knowledge' as her indicator of this presumed impact. Accounting knowledge is measured by the loanee's ability to provide information on all three of the following questions related to loan use: a) input costs b) product yield and c) profitability of the loan-funded activity. A loanee who is able to answer all of these questions will be counted as 'empowered'. Examining the effect of different stages of involvement in loan-funded enterprises on the likelihood of members of the different credit organisations being 'empowered', Ackerly finds that the most important factors influencing the likelihood of an empowerment impact is whether or not women provided labour to loan-assisted enterprise, sold their own products, but above all, kept their own accounts. Consequently, she concludes that 'knowledge and empowerment come through market access' (p. 64) and she warns against the negative consequences in terms of overwork, fatigue and malnutrition which are likely to occur if loans are used to promote women's labour involvement without promoting their market involvement.

The picture painted by this set of evaluations is a bleak one : loans to women do little to alter their subordinate position within the household since the loans are largely appropriated or surrendered to their husbands; there is little change in the management of income as a result; depletion of subsistence resources to repay loans when husbands are unable to may lead to lowering of consumption levels within the household; women's work loads increase without any commensurate increase in their access to the products of their labour; conflict and violence against women is intensified as husbands pressurise them to take loans or retaliate when asked for repayment funds. Indeed, given that men control the loans given to women, at least one of the evaluations argues it may actually strengthen, rather than weaken, male dominance within the household (Montgomery et al. op cit. p. 173).

### **3. Does access to credit 'empower' women: the evidence for a positive verdict**

A very different picture emerges if we turn to the more positive evaluations of the same subset of credit programmes. Rahman's study of Grameen Bank in 1986, which included a comparative component between women loanees, women from male loanee households and women from economically equivalent households who have not received any credit. She provided early documentation of the phenomenon of loan transfer by female loanees but found it to be low: nearly 80% of female loanees in her sample had used more than 75% of their loans themselves. She found that loanee households in general had higher income and consumption standards than equivalent non-loanee households but that loans to women were

more likely to benefit male consumption standards than male loans were to benefit female consumption standards. However, she also found that women appeared to benefit from their direct access to loans, whether or not they used it themselves. Active women loanees had higher consumption standards than women who did not use their own loans but both in turn had considerably higher consumption standards than women from male loanee households or from control group households who had not received any credit. For instance, she found that an average of 63 takas were spent annually on women's health in 'active' female loanee households; 57 takas in 'passive' female loanee households and around 16 takas on women in male loanee households and in households which had not received any credit. As far as decision-making was concerned, the same pattern emerged: 'active' female loanees were more likely to take decisions on their own or jointly with their husbands than 'passive' female loanees and both in turn were more likely to participate in decision-making than wives of male loanees. In other words, loan transfer by women reduced, but did not obliterate, the favourable impact of loans on women's consumption standards and decision-making.

A more recent study by Pitt and Khandker (1995) explored the impact of male and female membership of three credit programmes (Grameen Bank, BRAC and BRDB-RD12) on a variety of household and individual outcomes as a route to establishing the extent to which gender of the loanee made a difference to these outcomes. Their study covered 1798 households of which 1538 households were receiving credit from one of the organisations and 260 did not receive any credit. The study controlled for the possibility of selection bias in the kind of villages that programs were likely to be operate in as well as in the type of women who were likely to apply for loans. They found that credit had significant effects on the range of well-being related outcomes selected for their study and that credit to women was more likely to have these effects than credit to men. The outcomes affected by access to credit included both individual-level, gender-differentiated outcomes, such as the value of women's non-land assets, the total hours worked per month for cash income by women within the household and the education of children as well as household-based outcomes, such as total consumption expenditure. The authors concluded that their findings not only suggested that households receiving loans were largely better-off than those not receiving loans but also that the finding that loans to women had a differential impact on their well-being indicators than loans to men supported the hypothesis that greater weight was being given to women's preferences in determining household decision-making outcomes in households in which they had access to loans than in those in which either men received the loans or no loans were received at all. Credit to women, in other words, improved their bargaining position within the household.

A third example of a 'positive' verdict is by Hashemi et al. (1996). The focus of their evaluation is also on changes in 'outcomes' believed to be associated with access to credit, but the changes here relate to some of the gender-specific constraints believed to underlie women's subordinate status in the Bangladesh context rather than to conventional measures of 'wellbeing'. They used eight indicators of empowerment, each of which was constructed on the basis of achieving a certain score for positive responses to questions relating to different dimensions of change. These dimension were:

- mobility: the extent to which women reported having gone, on their own or accompanied, to certain pre-identified places, such as the market, a medical facility, outside the village, movies, etc.
- ability to make large and small purchases.
- economic security: women's ownership of productive assets, including house or homestead land and having cash savings
- involvement in major decision-making: such as purchasing land, rickshaw or purchasing livestock for income earning purposes.
- freedom from family domination: ability to make choices concerning their money was used; visiting their natal home; sale of their jewellery or land; and to work outside.
- political awareness: knowledge of key national and political figures; the law on inheritance; and significance of registered marriages
- participation in public protest and campaigns: participation in campaigns for political candidates or to protest unfair wages; wife beating; a man divorcing or abandoning his wife; high-handedness of officials or police.
- a composite indicator. Women who had scored positively on at least five of the above indicators were counted as empowered on the composite indicator.

The data was drawn from a survey of 1300 married women, including loanees from BRAC and Grameen bank as well as a comparison group of eligible women who lived in a Grameen village but had not taken a loan and a comparison group of eligible women who lived in a village with neither credit programme. Hashemi et al found that participation in credit programmes, together with length of membership, contributed significantly to the likelihood of women being empowered in terms of a number of the indicators: the ability to make small and large purchases; involvement in major family decision-making; participation in public action; women's mobility; political and legal awareness; and the composite indicator.

Women's economic contribution to family income, a crude proxy for the extent to which

women utilised their loans themselves, was also found to be enhanced by women's access to credit.

When women's economic contribution was used as an independent variable, the effect of access to credit on the empowerment indicators was reduced, but remained significant, suggesting that one important route by which women's access to credit translated into 'empowerment' was via their enhanced contribution to family income. This was further supported by their estimation of the predicted probability of scoring on the composite indicator: women were least likely to score when they had neither access to loans nor participation in an income-earning activity while membership of a credit organisation and contribution to family income independently increased the likelihood of scoring. Around 50% of the women who had used all or some of their loans for an activity in which they were involved, alone or jointly, were likely to score on the composite indicator compared to 36% of those who had not used any of their loans on an activity in which they were involved and between 9-15% of women who had not received any loans.

In the light of the earlier discussion on the link between credit and domestic violence, it is also worth noting that Hashemi et al found that membership of credit programmes appeared to be associated with *reduced* incidence of violence against women: 9-13% of women who were members of credit organisations reported male violence compared to 21-27% of women from the two comparison groups. In a subsequent, more detailed exploration of factors explaining the incidence of male violence, using the same data set, (Schuler et al, 1996), they found that women who had sons were less likely to have been beaten in the past year and that older women were less likely to be beaten than women in their twenties or younger. These findings are consistent with the lower status of young wives who are relatively new in the husband's home and with the strong son preference which characterises the society. Women with some education were less likely to have been beaten than women with no education. Finally, they found that membership of a credit programme was associated with a significant reduction in violence, but that the level of women's economic contribution did not have any significant effect.

They elaborate further on these results with findings from ethnographic research carried out by their research team which help to place the findings on male violence reported by Goetz and Sen Gupta in a rather different light. First of all they note that male violence was widespread in their study villages, as it is in much of Bangladesh; that it varied considerably from village to village; and that it largely occurred in the context of marriage. Women were

beaten on a variety of pretexts: for giving birth to daughters; for not performing their household chores to the husbands' satisfaction; for talking back when reprimanded; for urging their husbands to seek work or to stop gambling; for pointing to husbands' failure to fulfill their role as provider; for asking for money for any expense, even medical expenses; and in relation to non-payment of dowry. In terms of the effect of credit programmes on the incidence of male violence, Schuler et al suggest that one reason appeared to be that women's greater participation in social networks outside the family contributed to their family's fear of public exposure of domestic violence. Women's greater participation in political activity as a result of their membership of credit organisation may be relevant here.

In addition, despite the lack of effect of women's economic contribution on the incidence of male violence in their statistical analysis, the study did come across a number of examples of women who directly attributed the decline they experienced in terms of domestic violence towards them to improvements in their household economic situation as a result of their access to credit. In fact, some women reported receiving greater help from their husbands with their domestic chores in order to allow them to attend their group meetings. However, such declines were also reported even where husbands had made use of the woman's loans. Schuler et al. suggest that one reason why women's economic contribution did not appear to affect the incidence of violence in their statistical analysis was because this effect was partly captured by membership of a credit organisation. Women's economic contribution had to reach a certain level before it had an effect on male violence independent of the membership variable. By and large, most women who were members of BRAC and Grameen had modest incomes with only 20% of their sample contributing half or more of the family income.

However, they also noted cases where violence appeared to be associated with women's access to credit. When women acquire rights to resources, conflicts are likely to develop in cases where husbands seek to take over these resources or refuse to contribute to loan repayments when they have taken over women's loans. Of the villages which they studied, violence appeared to be most widespread in contexts where the greatest transformation was underway, in other words, where women were most likely to use their loans to take up economic activities. It was least widespread in the village with lowest percentage of women contributing to family support. Worth noting here is that male appropriation of women's loans and assets (ie. seizure without consent) varied considerably between their study villages; it was reported by 33% of women from the most violent village where paradoxically transformation of gender roles had gone furthest but by only 10% of women from the least violent village where women were most likely to surrender their loans. The highest levels of

empowerment by their indicators appeared to be associated with women who had emerged from a period of conflict with a new definition of their roles and position. Their husbands might continue to beat them but they refused to give up their newly found rights. Thus, it would appear that conflict, violence and struggle over resources are most likely to be reported in the context where the transformation of gender relations and challenge to male privilege has gone furthest and least likely to occur in contexts where women do not attempt to exercise their entitlement to the loans they receive.

The message from this set of evaluations of the impact of credit is consequently far more positive. It suggests that access to credit can, in and of itself, introduce important changes in the lives of women and their families, improving their own and their family's standard of living, leading to greater resources being invested in their health and in their children's education, reducing levels of male violence within the family; enhancing their economic contribution to the family and increasing their decision-making power. However, these changes all appear to be more marked when women use at least some proportion of their loans to enhance their own contributions to the household economy rather than surrendering the entire amount voluntarily or involuntarily to male relatives .

#### **4. Explaining the contradictions: conflicting answers or differing questions?**

It will be apparent by now that conflicting conclusions about the 'empowerment' potential of credit for women reported in these various studies reflect a variety of factors. There are conflicting empirical findings, for instance, concerning the extent to which credit exacerbates or lessens violence against women; the extent to which it enables or fails to enable women to acquire independent assets; and the extent to which it is associated with an increase or decrease in living standards. In as much as the positive findings on these tend to be backed up by a quantitative indication of their incidence and significance while the negative findings tend to rely far more on secondary literature, speculation and field observation to interpret their quantitative findings, some of the conflicts in empirical findings may reflect differences in majority versus minority, or 'average' versus 'non-average' outcomes. There are also conflicting judgements about perceived impact. The more positive evaluations highlight the quantified increase in women's standard of living, economic contribution to the household and decision-making power as evidence of changes in intra-household relations while the more negative evaluations largely ignore them or else by downplay their significance: 'it may be possible to hypothesize that women's 'social status' in the eyes of male kin is somewhat enhanced by bringing more credit into the household, performing more work, and generating

additional income. But this does not necessarily give them any notable increase in power' (Montgomery et al. p. 173).

This draws attention to the very differing judgements embodied in the two sets of evaluations as to what changes are significant enough to '*necessarily*' constitute evidence of empowerment. In other words, it suggests that there are very differing models of power underpinning the two sets of evaluations so that the acceptability of one or other set of conclusions about the transformatory impact of credit for women will ultimately rest on the credence attached to their underlying models of power. Such models are often implicit in the analysis rather than being explicitly spelt out but they can be recovered from the kinds of questions asked, assumptions made and changes prioritised in the various evaluations. A useful pointer in uncovering these models of power stems from the observation that, by and large, the negative evaluations base their analysis on the *processes* of loan use and management while the positive evaluations tend to focus largely on *outcomes* associated with, and attributable to, loan access.

The focus on process reflects an underlying assumption that 'empowerment' requires a change in the formal structures of gender relations, in particular in the prevailing physical division of labour which confines women to secluded homebased stages of production and gives men major responsibility for market transactions. Because men are observed to have retained their privileged access to the market, male dominance within the household is presumed to have remained intact. However, a closer scrutiny of these findings suggests that they are frequently deduced from the observation of formal structures rather than being based on direct evidence on how power might be exercised within the household.

An example of this 'structuralist deductivism' is to be found, for instance, in Ackerly's assertion that even where women's loans are invested in traditionally female activities like paddy processing, control over their loans will pass into male hands, unless women market their own products and keep accounts of their enterprises: 'For this activity a woman takes credit and gives the money to her husband to purchase unprocessed paddy at the market. The woman, sometimes with the help of other family members including her husband, processes the paddy... The husband then takes the processed paddy to market for sale. Although the activity is funded by the woman's credit and she contributes labour to the product sold, *the economic control of the activity rests with the man by virtue of his access to the market*' (p. 58, my italics). However, this assertion appears to be based on Ackerly's conflation of 'economic control' with 'accounting knowledge', a conflation similar to the one discussed

earlier between control as policy decisions and management as implementational decisions. In any case, Ackerly's analysis of empowerment is somewhat tautological since women who sell their own products and keep accounts of their loans are also more likely to know what their inputs cost, what their produce sold for and what profits they made than those who do not but whether this constitutes evidence of empowerment or not remains to be demonstrated. If this is to be plausible as an indicator of 'empowerment', and it may well prove to be a useful one, we would need some additional evidence linking 'accounting knowledge' to some of the favourable outcomes she outlines in her scenario of the 'empowered woman'.

A similar structural deductivism characterises the assumption by Montgomery et al that 'jointness' in the management of household enterprise and income appear to be simply a disguised form of male dominance, leading them to ignore the extremely high incidence of 'family partnerships' reported by female loanees and instead on the low incidence of 'sole authority' enterprises as evidence that they have not been 'empowered' by their access to loans. By extension, the fact that women on their third loans were more likely to report individual loan use is taken as evidence of greater control over loans being exercised by longer-standing borrowers. Similarly, they assume that reports of 'income pooling' by female borrowers is in fact income under predominantly male authority and that only women who handle cash themselves can be taken to be exercising control over income.

The tendency to interpret reports of 'jointness' as evidence of male dominance, and its corollary, the tendency to interpret evidence of individual loan use and income management by women as evidence of their 'enhanced control' highlights another common thread which runs through the more negative evaluations viz. the equation of women's empowerment with individualised forms of behaviour. This is evident, for instance, in the 'zero-sum' notion of empowerment embedded in the index of loan control developed by Goetz and Sen Gupta whereby women appear to exercise more control only if men apparently exercise less; there is no place in their index either for greater or lesser 'jointness' of decision-making as evidence of women's greater or lesser role in household-wide decision-making. Yet in a situation where women have been marginalised in intra-household decision-making processes, 'empowerment' may take the form of greater role in joint decision-making processes rather than the emergence of individualised decision-making processes. The same is true of the assertion by Montgomery et al. that unless substantial assets are gained and retained in 'solely female hands' (p. 173), women's 'breakdown position', and hence bargaining power, within the household is unlikely to be radically altered and women are unlikely to wish to 'openly'

threaten the distribution of male privilege within the household. This may be formally true but again it overlooks the point that where women have seldom owned any assets in their own name, joint entitlement to land and other valued assets may constitute a major advance on their previous state of assetlessness. In any case, the realities of rural life in Bangladesh mean that for many women, it makes better sense to strengthen the likelihood of 'co-operation' within the family, their primary source of social capital, by investing in joint or even male assets rather than seeking to strengthen their break-down positions - although in conflictual marriages, the men they invest in are more likely to be their sons than their husbands.

This individualistic notion of empowerment also underlies Goetz and Sen Gupta's interpretation of the kinds of loan management practices they classify as empowering and those they do not. This is best illustrated by considering the purchase of a rickshaw, a common enough use of women's loans in their study. Rickshaw pulling in Bangladesh is a purely male activity so that the purchase represents investment of the loan in an activity in which women are unable to contribute any labour; it has to be pulled by a man. According to Goetz and Sen Gupta, a woman would still be counted as retaining 'significant control' if the rickshaw was licensed in her name and if she established a contract with the rickshaw puller for a regular rent from the activity (p. 50). However, this version of 'significant control' would be extremely anomalous behaviour by a woman in a family in which there was an unemployed or underemployed son or husband able and willing to pull the rickshaw and to help her repay the loan. Indeed such behaviour would go against the very notion of wifedom and motherhood which are central to the identity of many Bangladeshi women. More appropriate evidence of women's 'control' over loans in such cases would relate to how actively they had participated, either unilaterally or jointly, in policy making decisions about loan use: in purchasing the rickshaw, deciding whose name it would be registered in and why and how the loan was going to be repaid.

Turning to the more positive evaluations, how plausible are the models of empowerment which underpin them? One of the main advantages of the indicators selected by Hashemi et al is that they are largely derived from the lived experiences of those they seek to study and consequently bear some relation to the actual operations of power within rural Bangladeshi households. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Hashemi et al (as well as Rahman op. cit.) incorporate a recognition of forms of 'jointness' within the household into their indicators of empowerment, allowing for individual as well as joint decision-making by women in their analysis of decision-making and own or joint activities in their analysis of women's

involvement in loan-funded activities. However, it is also important to note that some of the indicators used may reflect organisational priorities and practice rather than women's own and hence cannot be taken to constitute unambiguous evidence of their empowerment. Thus, women's knowledge of their legal rights or their participation in campaigning for a political candidate or over some perceived injustice will have very different meanings if they are promoted by the organisation in question rather than initiated by women themselves. BRAC, for instance, encourages some of these activities as part of its credit programme and is likely to score highly in terms of its empowerment achievements on this kind of criteria. However, for such knowledge and activities to constitute evidence of a real change in power relations, they must also be valued by women as an aspect of their own goals. The question then becomes would women continue to participate in such activities and value such knowledge in the absence of BRAC ?

Similarly, the greater ownership of homestead land among women loanees does not in and of itself constitute evidence of empowerment when, as in the case of Grameen Bank, housing loans to women are tied to the condition that homestead land is registered in their name. While ownership of homestead land may improve women's bargaining position within the household, it has to be recognised that in these particular cases, when it occurred as a result of programme practice, it cannot be taken as evidence of an increase in women's ability to exercise initiative as a result of access to credit. Similarly, Ackerly's finding that loanees with certain credit organisations are more likely to be 'empowered' on her accounting knowledge criteria may merely reflect the fact that some organisations are more likely than others to promote women's market knowledge and accounting responsibility. Consequently, in assessing the findings reported by evaluation studies such as those of by Hashemi et al., it is important to bear in mind the distinction between changes which may be desired by women themselves and those which are deemed desirable by an organisation. However valid the latter might be, they will not constitute evidence of women's empowerment until and unless their value is shared by women themselves.

Pitt and Khandker attempt to capture intra-household power relations through the idea of the weight given to the preferences of different household members in household decision-making processes. Thus, if decision-making outcomes differ systematically and significantly between male and female loanee households, this can be taken as evidence that access to loans increases the weight given to the preferences of the loanee in question. In some cases, the outcomes studied are clearly directly beneficial to the loanee in question so that Rahman's finding that more resources are spent on women's clothing and health needs in households

where they receive loans than in those in which they do not is at the very least indicative that their value within those households has gone up, even if their ability to make choices and take decisions has not.

In other cases, however, differential outcomes by gender of the loanee are harder to interpret as evidence of women's 'empowerment'. One such anomalous finding, reported by Pitt and Khandker, is that women loanees spent more time on market-related work than women in male loanee households but that men spent less time on market-related work if their *household* received credit, regardless of whether the loanee in question was a male or female household. While the authors themselves suggest that women's increased market work was an 'empowerment' effect of their access to loans while men's reduced market work was an 'income' effect, this is a presumed rather than a demonstrated effect and as such open to other more negative interpretations. For instance, the likelihood of women's increased market work is given a negative interpretation by Montgomery et al who suggest that 'the burden of women's work increases as a result of credit-supported activities but the control over the proceeds of that work remains in the hands of male kin' (p. 167); by Ackerly who warns that increasing women's labour involvement in credit-funded activities without enhancing their market access and accounting knowledge may result in overwork, fatigue and malnutrition and by Goetz and Sen Gupta who also point to the danger that loan to women will simply increase their labour burdens without bring any increase in their control over the productive process.

Men's ability to enjoy greater leisure as a result of loan access, regardless of who gets the loan, also lends itself to alternative interpretations: as evidence of 'male privilege' rather than, or as well as, of an 'income effect'. Similarly, the finding that household consumption expenditure is higher in female loanee households than in male may reflect the fact that loans to women are 'heavily compromised by the persisting responsibilities of women to cover the consumption needs of the family' (Montgomery et al. p. 168). Or it may reflect an Engels-curve effect in that the women loanees in question come from poorer households and hence are likely to spend a higher proportion of any income increment on basic needs. Or, it may indeed, as Pitt and Khandker suggest, reflect gender differences in preferences and bargaining power between male and female loanees.

The problem with the Pitt and Khandker study is the problem with much of this genre of neoclassical analysis: it is strong on highly sophisticated econometric modelling but weak on the kind of contextual information necessary to interpret their findings. However, if the Pitt

and Khandker study is characterised by a high ratio of empirical data to contextual interpretation, the more negative evaluations tend to be characterised by a high ratio of speculative interpretation to empirical data so that the impacts reported are frequently ‘read off’ from their theoretical frameworks rather than from concrete evidence. What all these evaluations do have in common – both the positive and the negatives ones – is the absence of the voices of the women loanees themselves telling us what kinds of impact they might value and the aspects of their subordination which they might most seek to change.

The point I am making here does *not* revolve around a distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods; some of the evaluations cited here do offer qualitative and ethnographic analysis. Rather it revolves around the distinction between ‘their’ realities and ‘ours’: between impacts prioritised by ‘us’ and those prioritised by ‘them’. None of the evaluations cited here permit women to testify on their own behalf as to what credit has meant to them. Obviously, in the context of evaluation studies where valued resources are at stake, personal testimonies on impact have to be interpreted with caution, given that there may be a strong incentive among beneficiaries to present impact in a positive light. However, the absence of women’s own voices in these evaluations appears to reflect other, deeper methodological considerations. Economists are notoriously reluctant to rely on people’s own accounts of their preferences and motivations because they fear that there will be a tendency to disguise the self-interested forms of behaviour predicted by neo-classical models in altruistic forms (Arrow, 1991). Feminist researchers have also expressed unease about an uncritical reliance on ‘women’s voices’ because of their fear that women often internalise dominant values and hence appear to ‘consent’ to their subordination. This point is made, for instance, by Jackson (1996) in her critique of the populist claims made for PRA as ‘giving voice’ to the perceptions of local people and the implicit assumption that their articulated perceptions are necessarily complete truths: ‘Edwin Ardener’s analysis of mutedness as a feature of the politics of communication in research draws attention to the problems of articulating perceptions (1975). For women who are excluded from dominant worldviews and male vocabularies it is not wise to assume they can, or will, simply express their priorities as PRA assumes’ (p. )

While this is a valid note of caution, the denial of ‘voice’ to the women most affected by a development intervention in evaluating its impact on their lives carries the danger of reinforcing precisely the ‘mutedness’ of women within their communities that Jackson is pointing to and of denying them ‘voice’ a second time around. And in the context of the development literature, in which Bangladeshi women are so frequently portrayed as silent and passive victims of a patriarchy which has been described as ‘among the least negotiable in the

world (Goetz, 1992, p. 12), it serves to reinforce their 'mutedness' in the wider context. Participatory impact assessments which require 'us' to listen to 'them', can contribute important insights into the 'lived experience', as opposed to the academic theorisation, of gender subordination and into the different forms it takes in different parts of the world. This stress on the value of personal testimonies should not be taken as a negation of the value of quantitative data. The statistical analysis of quantifiable findings plays a valuable role in providing some idea of their incidence and magnitude, helping to distinguish between those which are widespread and those which are relevant only to a minority. Some combination of both methods is likely to help to allow an evaluation to encompass both the subjective and objective dimensions of change.

In the next section of the paper, I will be drawing on my participatory impact assessment of the SEDP in order to explore what is added to our understanding of the 'empowerment' potential of loans when it is explored from women's own vantage point. I hope to show that the value of relying on women's own evaluations is not only that it provides some sense of their individual voices, priorities and personalities but it also helps to contextualise and illuminate some of positive as well as negative impacts reported by studies discussed earlier, validating some and rejecting others. While the focus will be on the oral testimonies of female loanees, given that this is the group which has generated most controversy, it will be supplemented with insights obtained from interviews with male loanees and with male relatives of female loanees where these were available. I will also be relying on quantitative data, drawn both from my own fieldwork, as well as from the secondary literature, to establish how much empirical weight should be given to the different impacts reported. Finally, given that SEDP has different aims and organisational practices to the set of credit programmes discussed so far, I will use my own findings to distinguish between impacts which can be attributed to credit per se and impacts which appear to be produced by specific organisational practice.

Field work for the evaluation consisted of a brief exploratory phase in November 1996 and a longer field work phase in January/February 1997. The second phase consisted of two forms of data collection. The first was a short questionnaire which was administered by research teams in the two districts. The aim of this component of the exercise was to get a quantitative picture of who was receiving SEDP loans, the purposes for which loans were used and the broad impact of the loans. A total of 305 loanees were interviewed in Mymmensingh and 391 in Faridpur. Loanees were identified with initial assistance from field officers but subsequently through the loanees themselves or their neighbours in order to avoid being

directed only to the 'success stories'. The second component was a series of 70 semi-structured interviews which I conducted myself in Bengali, using a tape recorder. 50 of the interviews were with female loanees and 20 with men. Female loanees will be simply referred to in the analysis as F1 to F50, where F1 to F20 came from Mymensingh while the rest came from Faridpur. Similarly, M1 to M12 were male loanees from Mymensingh while the rest came from Faridpur. These interviews were used to explore loanees' own perceptions of the impact of loans on their lives. Quantitative analysis is thus used in this study to *summarize* patterns of impact by gender while the qualitative data is used to *explain* them.

## **5. Some background on the SEDP: its goals, norms and practices**

The SEDP was established in Greater Faridpur district in 1990 and extended to Mymensingh district in 1992. Rather than being a source of direct lending, it acts as an intermediary organisation between potential loanees and the nationalised Agrani Bank which manages a largely NORAD-funded credit line. The goal of the SEDP is the promotion of small-scale labour-intensive enterprises in order to enhance income and expand employment through the delivery of subsidized credit and training for skills development. Female entrepreneurship is also included as a priority goal of SEDP and special gender and development officers have been charged in both districts with ensuring this goal is achieved.

Potential beneficiaries are defined as those with at least 50 decimals of land and with some prior entrepreneurial competence. They are identified through the efforts of field officers located in field offices throughout the two districts and must attend a two-three day training at district headquarters during which they are given basic training in entrepreneurial skills, some social development training and then assessed for their entrepreneurial potential on the basis of their performance during the training. Loans can range from 5000/- takas to 500,000/-. Loan applications are appraised in collaboration with an official of the bank and the size of the loan issued adjusted accordingly. Two personal guarantees are necessary for the loan to be approved and first loans are frequently secured by deeds to property owned by the loanee. Interest is paid on a subsidised basis, varying from 10-14% depending on size of the loan, while the repayment period is fixed on the basis of loan size and type of enterprise. Repayment is generally on a monthly basis and repayment rates are high at over 90%.

SEDP thus differs from the main poverty-oriented programmes discussed earlier in this paper in a number of significant ways which are summarised in Table 1. It lends considerable sums

of money at subsidised rates of interest on an individual basis to people who are by no means the 'poorest of the poor' and its goal is enterprise development rather than either poverty alleviation or women's empowerment. However, it will also be seen that many poor people, particularly poor women, benefitted from their access to SEDP loans, while its implications for women's empowerment is the main topic of the rest of the paper. The eligibility criteria of at least 50 decimals of land, which could include homestead land, still covers extremely poor households in the Bangladesh context while the limits on loan size served to rule out wealthier sections of the population.

Tables 2 and 3, which summarise some of the characteristics of loanees, points to the economic differences in the backgrounds of women and men. In district terms, loanees in Faridpur reported larger cultivable, and among men, homestead as well, land holdings than those in Mymensingh. Within each district, male loanees report larger mean size of owned cultivable and homestead land holding than female loanees. It has, of course, to be borne in mind that some of the households may have expanded their landholdings precisely as a result of SEDP lending but this is unlikely to have altered the overall pattern too radically. Loanees in Faridpur were more likely to own a pond than those in Mymensingh and within each district, male loanee households were more likely to own a pond than female.

Education levels act as a proxy for both household socio-economic status as well individual capacity to access and utilise a range of livelihood sources. Mean levels of education were higher for male loanees female overall as well as within each district. Although not shown in the tables, the survey data suggests that between 22-25% of male loanees in the two districts had no education compared to 70% of female loanees in Mymensingh and 63% of female loanees in Faridpur. It would appear, on the basis of the evidence on both education and land holdings that women loanees in Faridpur come from somewhat better-off households than female loanees in Mymensingh. This likelihood is given further support in Table 3 which shows that female loanees are more likely to be household heads in Mymensingh than Faridpur - in Bangladesh, female headship tends to be unequivocally associated with poverty. It is therefore likely that lending to women in Mymensingh is more likely to have a direct poverty impact than lending to either female loaness in Faridpur and male loanees in general. We will be referring to this differential where relevant in the rest of the analysis.

Tables 4a and 4b report on the first and second occupations reported by male and female loanees in the two districts. A number of differences are immediately apparent both by district and by gender. Women were occupied in a far smaller range of occupations than men, with

livestock rearing the most important 'female' occupation in Faridpur and paddy husking the most important in Mymensingh. Production of cane and bamboo goods was second in importance as a 'female' occupation in both districts. In addition, a few women invested in poultry raising, homebased tailoring, hawking and 'shops' (including basic grocery shops and hotel/restaurants). Male occupations were more evenly distributed between 'shops' of various kinds, workshops of various kinds, seed nurseries and managing power tillers in Faridpur and rice mills in Mymensingh. This gender patterning of the occupational structure is not an unusual or unexpected finding in a context where the practice of purdah continues to constrain women's mobility in the public domain, limiting their choice of enterprise and their ability to carry out transactions in the market place. While men are able to engage in a large range of activities, independently of the assistance of women from their households, women remain dependent on men for at least the market-based stages of their entrepreneurial activities, which in any case tend to be restricted to those which can be carried out within the homestead precincts. It is also worth noting that a sizeable proportion of male loanees in each district also reported as one of their occupations whichever happened to be the dominant female occupation in their respective district. Thus, paddy husking, the primary 'female' activity in Mymensingh, was also reported by a considerable number of male loanees in that district while a number of male loanees in Faridpur reported livestock rearing as an occupation. In other words, purely 'female' occupations are less common in the survey than purely 'male' occupations reflecting men's greater scope for managing or participating in 'female' enterprises than women's in typically 'male' enterprises. The rare cases in which women carried out all stages of an activity, including the marketing stages, were either reported by female headed households, or were a specific tradition in a particular area, such as female itinerant hawking in one area in Mymensingh.

Although not reported here, data was also collected on households' other economic activities apart from loanees' primary and secondary occupations. Households were found to be largely dependent on various forms of self employment, most reporting at least two enterprises and many reporting three. Very few loanee households had any member in waged or salaried employment. Table 5 confirms both gender and district differentials noted earlier in terms of the significance of livestock rearing as an enterprise. The greater likelihood of female loanee households of owning some poultry and livestock attests to its greater significance as female-managed economic activity as well as the greater likelihood of women using loans, or loan-related income increments, to purchase such assets. Furthermore, in keeping with the finding that livestock-related enterprises were more frequently reported by male and female loanees in Faridpur, we find that these households were much more likely to own at least one cow

than households in Mymensingh. Loans tended to be directly used to purchase cows or calves while the purchase of goats and poultry were more often financed with loan-related income increments. Women have traditionally kept smaller livestock like goats as well as poultry as a relatively independent source of income so that ownership of these assets were less consistently related to female loanee status in the two districts.

Table 6 shows the mean size of loans received by male and female loanees in the two districts. In almost all cases, second loans were larger than the first loans. Predictably, women received smaller loan sizes than men but the size of the gender differential varied considerably between the two districts. 77% of first loans for female loanees in Mymensingh were in minimum loan size range of around 5000/- compared to only 7% of first loans for male loanees. The majority of first loans to male loanees in Mymensingh were distributed between the 10,000-19,999; 20,000-29,999; and 30,000+ brackets. However, in Faridpur, only 21% of first loans to female loanees, and 4% of first loans to male loanees, were in the lowest loan size bracket. Instead, the majority of first loans to men as well as to women in Faridpur was in the 10,000-20,000 bracket. It should be noted that loans of this size to women are highly unusual in the Bangladesh context where there is a very limited tradition of female entrepreneurship.

Table 7 shows the distribution of male and female loanees by number of loans in the two districts. As far as gender is considered, there appears to be little difference in numbers of loans received by male and female loanees in Faridpur. However, in Mymensingh, women were more likely to have been issued third (36%) and fourth (15%) loans compared to male loanees (9% and 6%). Consequently, the smaller size of loans issued to female loanees, relative to male loanees, in Mymensingh appears to be partly offset by the larger number of loans issued to them though not sufficiently to equalise overall amounts of credit received. This overall pattern of gender differentials in lending by district is in fact confirmed by the SEDP's own records which show that women in Faridpur have been given a higher profile in SEDP lending from the outset. 54% of total number of loans and 39% of total amounts of loans disbursed between 1991-1994 were to women in Faridpur compared to 42% of the total number of loans and 20% of total loans amounts disbursed in Mymeningh between 1992-1994 (SEDP, 1996, Tables 3.2 and 3.2a). Differences in management attitudes and practices are the most likely explanation for this difference in lending strategies to women loanees in the two districts. SEDP in Faridpur appears to have targetted more educated women loanees as well as women from better-off households possibly on the grounds that they are more likely to make successful entrepreneurs and hence more capable of absorbing larger loans.

## 6 Characteristics of loan use and repayment

Given the attention in various evaluations to the question of loan use and loan transfer by women loanees, it had been hoped to collect some quantitative information on the significance of this phenomenon in relation to SEDP lending. However, it became quickly evident that this was going to be a complicated task. Two different approaches to loan utilization were in evidence among loanee households, broadly corresponding to Chambers's distinction (1988) between 'fox-like' livelihood strategies, the reliance on multiple sources of livelihoods, and 'hedgehog'-like livelihood strategies, the predominant reliance on a single source of livelihood. The 'hedgehog' category was made up of largely male loanees from better-off households whose primary source of livelihood was a small scale enterprise of some sort - jewellery shop; restaurant, engineering workshop; fertiliser or seed business- which they had been engaged in prior to taking a loan from SEDP. This business represented both the main use of loan funds as well as the main source of loan repayments, household needs and any saving or re-investment undertaken by the loanee. Their loan utilisation strategy was relatively easy to document since the bulk of their loans were invested in and repaid from a single activity under male management.

The same could not be said of the 'foxes' among the loanees whose 'messier' patterns of loan utilization and repayment were difficult to fit into the neat, predesigned boxes entailed in the typical questionnaire. Such households were characterised by multiple, rather than single, livelihood activities and by interdependence, rather than independence, between these various activities and hence between various members who participated in them. Poorer loanees, particularly poorer female loanees, tended to be more 'fox-like' in their activities because the options available to them were generally more poorly paid, casual and seasonal and occupational diversification an important strategy by which they sought to iron out fluctuations in their income flows. Tracking loan allocation between various activities and people was made even more complicated by the fact that many loanees had taken more than one loan, with some going upto 3 or 4. Consequently, using information about knowledge or labour contribution for a single loan-funded activity in a situation of multiple loans, combined with multiple uses under multiple managers per loan would not have yielded a very accurate or meaningful indicator of 'control' while the alternative of collecting information on all the different loans would have been extremely time-consuming and expensive<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, one female loanee divided her first loan of 5200 takas between her paddy processing business and her husband's seed business while her second loan of 10,000/- was divided between her

However, a number of general observations can be made on the basis of the qualitative analysis. First of all, the majority of loanees, male as well as female, invested at least some proportion of their loans in an activity which they themselves managed. In other words, a sizeable majority of women as well as men utilised some part of their credit to enhance the productivity of enterprises they participated in. Secondly, women were far more likely to invest some part of their loans in male-managed enterprises than men were in female-managed enterprises but the transfer of the full or even the major amount of all the loans that a woman received to a male-managed enterprise constituted the exception rather than the rule. In some cases loan transfer followed a sequential pattern so that the first loan might be invested in a female-managed activity; the second in a male; and the third might be once again in a female activity. In other cases, a single loan could be divided between male- and female-managed activities. The rationales reported in the qualitative interviews for sharing or transfer of loans to men varied: for some, it was an attempt to diversify household livelihoods and hence reduce risk; for some, it reflected the greater range and profitability of male enterprises; for others, it reflected their awareness of their reliance on men for various forms of assistance in their own enterprises (in a way that men did not generally rely on women's assistance) and hence the need to ensure that men benefitted as well from their access to loans; and in a small number of cases, loan transfer was the straightforward appropriation by men of loans issued in women's names.

The reverse phenomenon of men investing their loans in typically 'female' enterprises was far less common but by no means exceptional. As was noted earlier, a sizeable minority of male loanees reported the most common 'female' activity in their respective districts as a primary or secondary occupation. Given that concerns with minimizing risk, a common preoccupation among poorer households, could be equally, if not more, satisfactorily met through the diversification of *household*, rather than *individual*, livelihoods, it is not surprising that male loanees often invested some of their loans in enterprises which would be considered a 'female' sphere of activity as well as in enterprises managed by other male family members, such as brothers or sons. However, our qualitative data also suggested that investment by men in typically female activities often, but by no means inevitably, gave them managerial authority in that activity to an extent that women's investment in typically male activities did not. In other words, the asymmetry of gender relations within the household meant that

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paddy processing business, a calf which she reared, and hiring in labour to level land cultivated by her husband. Another loanee used her first loan of 5200 to purchase a cow which she reared; the second loan of 7000 takas was used to mortgage in land which her husband cultivated; to invest in her paddy

formally similar actions by men and women cannot be necessarily interpreted as generating substantively similar outcomes.

Attempts to estimate net profits as a result of loan investments were also fraught with difficulty. The problem stemmed from a number of sources. First of all, loanees who had not completed their repayments were unable to report on profits which had not yet materialised. Secondly, there were differences in the kind of profit earned. In some cases, profit was a one-off increment in income, for instance, the proceeds from the sale of a cow net of loan repayments and other expenditures incurred in raising the cow. In others, it was the net monthly increment in proceeds to a business as a result of investment in its working or fixed capital. In addition to differences between one-off and flow forms of profit, there were also differences in how profit was calculated. Monetary calculations were simple to report but in many cases, and among women loanees in particular, profits were calculated in kind rather than cash: *'I sold milk to repay the loans; the cow is my profit'* or *'our profit is two parts out of three'* - rather than in the common denominator of money. While the qualitative interviews did allow for a more detailed exploration of profit estimates, the problem of in-kind estimates remained. Estimation problems were further compounded by the fact that loans were often repaid from other sources rather than the loan-funded enterprise so that profit calculations required calibration between costs and returns to more than one enterprise. As a result of these various problems, very little confidence can be attached to the profits estimates we received and they are not reported. However, what can be reported with confidence is that most loanees reported satisfactory levels of profit, that less than 5% of male or female loanees reported a loss and few had problems with repayment. Where problems were reported, they reflected illness in the family, bad investment decisions on the part of the loanee or her husband or the diversion of the loan into an unproductive use, like dowry.

The other point to make, and it was backed up both by our admittedly unreliable quantitative estimates but also by the qualitative interviews, is that women loanees in Faridpur were reporting larger profits commensurate with the larger loan size that they received. Of course, these profits may have been partly generated by investment in male enterprises, which are generally regarded as more productive, but our qualitative data did provide evidence that livestock rearing, the most frequently reported form of female enterprise in the district, was a major source of women's profits. F45, who had started up this business as a result of her access to loans, explained the profitability of livestock rearing, despite its status as a

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processing business and to fund her children's education; while the third loan of 7500/- was pooled with her husband's savings and used to purchase cultivable land under his management.

traditional 'female' enterprise, but also why its profitability was crucially tied up with access to capital funds:

*Before milk used to cost just 6, 8 or 7 takas a kilo, but now the feed for the cow has increased so much in price. You didn't need to buy so much feed before, there was grass in the field, that was what they ate. Anyone could raise cows. Now you have to buy khor, khure and bushy (sawdust, straw and hay), that costs money. Before it cost 2 or 3 takas for a kg of feed., now it is all much more expensive so fewer people are looking after cows and you get more money for your milk. You never got 15 takas for a kg of milk before. But then you have to buy all the feed now. I have even sold milk for 23 and 25 takas. So unless you have capital, you can't make a profit out of cattle. I have brought just one loan of 20,000/- : I had to use 5000/- to raise a shed for the cows, then I had to buy the cows, I had to buy feed. I buy feed in bulk now, I feed it gur(molasses), because then I get good milk. All the loan and the milk income goes on the cows and on repayments, I will not know my profit till the repayments are made. It will take at least another year. I got the idea of taking a loan because people in our neighbourhood brought loans, you learn from watching other people. And someone else has learnt from watching me, this is how we learn.*

While F45 was not yet able to calculate her profit because she was still paying off her first loan, F41 was into her second loan and could give us a more complete account of her profit from the first. She was one of the more successful entrepreneurs we interviewed and her success appeared to depend on her prior knowledge of livestock rearing:

*I took a loan of 30,000/-. I bought 2 Australian cows. I made 1 lakh (100,000/-) profit from that loan. I then raised 26,000/- and bought more cows. I used their milk for our living expenses and repayments. I understand cows, that is my business. My husband sells the milk - I never go to the market - and he feeds it. The money from the milk stays with me, the profit is mine. I now have 3 cows, I sold one just before Eid for 16,000/-...*

SEDP does not rely on the group liability model for ensuring loan repayment so to what did it owe its high rates of repayment? Clearly, the possibility of getting further loans was one important incentive for ensuring loan repayment. A number of loanees, both male and female, reported paying off their first loans well before they were due, often borrowing in the process, in order to ensure a larger loan subsequently. In addition, both male and female

loanees referred to their fear of landing in gaol if they defaulted on their loans, given that their awareness that they were borrowing from a government bank. This anxiety was instilled into them during the preliminary training through a role play depicting the consequences of loan default. Among women loanees, however, the most common motivation expressed for loan repayment was 'honour'. The sentiment expressed by one of the women loanees was widespread among women loanees in general: *I am always concerned about the repayment. My husband sees this. He is aware I have a reputation at stake here, I have to repay the loan. If the SEDP officers have to come to my house because I have not gone in for my repayment, won't that be dishonourable.* Possibly linked to women's apparently greater concern with honour was the final reason given by a number of male as well as female loanees, which was that women were more conscientious in the repayments because they had few alternative sources of either credit or employment. As F19 said: *They give loans to women because they repay on time, women are frightened, men are not. Men think, If we don't repay the loan, so what?*<sup>2</sup>

## **7. Conceptualising impact: gender, poverty and trade-offs in basic wellbeing**

Turning to the question of impact, the central overall question framing this part of the analysis was 'What difference did the loans make to loanees' lives?' In other words, which and whose needs, priorities and interests were served both directly as a result of improved levels of income, consequent to access to credit, and indirectly in terms of the implications of this for power relations within the household and community? One way in which subordination manifests itself is by imposing trade-offs on the subordinate between critical aspects of their well-being. Chambers (1988), for instance, has pointed out that for the very poor, there is likely to be a hierarchy of priorities: basic survival needs in terms of food, water, clothing and shelter; security in the sense of minimizing fluctuations in household capacity to meet its basic needs over time; and finally, what he calls self-respect but which we might reformulate as some of the other intangible goals to which people aspire such as agency, status and social standing in their community.

While all three may be equally valued in principle, in practice, poverty imposes trade-offs so that pressing survival and security needs can sometimes only be met by sacrificing the more

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<sup>2</sup> Comparing some of the reasons given for rural women's greater compliance in paying off their loans and the reasons given by employers as well as workers in urban-based garment factories for the greater observed preference for female labour, it is striking that the docility and compliance demonstrated by women workers in the factory and by female loanees in the countryside reflected a similar structural cause, which was women's fewer choices relative to men: in access to alternative forms of employment in the former case and access to alternative sources of credit in the latter.

intangible benefits of social status or self-esteem. Gender does not necessarily alter these considerations but it does differentiate the nature of the tradeoff (Kabeer, 1994; Kabeer, 1997; Chant, 1997). While poorer men may be forced to seek out patronage relationships in order to meet their survival needs or assure security of livelihoods, poorer women may be forced to work for a pittance in highly visible forms of manual labour, which violate their sense of purdah. Or they may be forced into accepting violence and abuse within their marriages because on their own, they are extremely vulnerable in Bangladesh society and husbands still offer a form of social protection. Among better-off families, who have no anxieties about basic survival, and security of living standard, priorities are more likely to revolve around a second-order set of needs to do with longer-term security, status and 'positional' goods. Here too gender may be relevant in the kinds of choices made. One female loanee, whose family, though poor, obviously had some social standing within the community told me how prior to receiving a loan, she had preferred to ensure that she was properly dressed than properly fed because as she pointed out, *'people don't see how much rice you have in your stomach, but they see the clothes you wear'*.

While income-purchased forms of impact are relatively straightforward to assess, the same is clearly not the case for more intangible implications for women's empowerment, given the subjectivity necessarily entailed in establishing how agency and self-worth are experienced by different categories of social actors and the routes through which they might be affected by loans. The central challenge of the evaluation was therefore to uncover forms of impact which are not captured by purely by a focus on material living standards but which nevertheless represent changes which were valued by the loanees. Given the importance of the 'subjective' in evaluating these aspects of impact, I have given a central place in my analysis of impact to the qualitative assessments offered by the loanees themselves. This does not rule out the relevance or validity of the structuralist perspectives outlined earlier but seeks instead to evaluate structural constraints from the viewpoint of the social actors who have to live within them and analyse why and how they make seek to accommodate, adapt or challenge them. Of particular analytical interest will be evidence of improvements in the basic dimensions of well-being as well as evidence that tradeoffs between these different dimensions may have become less acute.

I would like to begin my analysis of loan impact with a relatively straightforward quantification of the uses to which loan-related income increments were put to. Table 8 reports on use of loan-related income by gender and district of loanee. Household consumption, which covers the basic needs of food, clothing and housing, featured significantly in reports of income use by both male and female loanees, reminding us that

these enterprises were also key sources of basic household livelihoods for most loanees. Consequently, re-investment in business can be regarded as a strategy for assuring both consumption standards as well as security in the future. However, there were also some differences discernible in use of loan-related income by gender and by district. In Mymmensingh, consumption and re-investment in a business activity were important uses of loan-related income for male as well as female loanees but women were far more likely to use their loan-related income entirely on consumption-related needs (58% compared to 35%) while male loanees generally also included some form of business investment. Given that female loanee households in Mymmensingh tend to be among the poorest in our sample, are more likely to be female-headed, to receive the smallest loans and to report the lowest income increments, this survival orientation may be poverty- rather than gender related. In Faridpur, too, we find that while both women and men reported investment in business and household consumption as important uses of loan-related incomes, male loanees were more likely to report either or both these uses (24%) compared to only 13 % of women loanees. Women loanees in Faridpur were more likely than men to include a 'security' related element (ie. either savings per se or some form of land acquisition, either purchase or mortgage) in the utilisation of their loan-related incomes: 72% compared to 58%. Thus female loanees in Faridpur, generally better off than those in Mymmensingh, tended to be more concerned with direct security assets than basic survival than female loanees in Mymmensingh or than their male counterparts in Faridpur. The possible link between poverty and the consumption orientation of female loanees in Mymmensingh suggests that the greater consumption expenditure associated with female lending in the study by Pitt and Khandker cited earlier may also reflect a poverty rather than a gender effect since female loanees in their study were also likely to come from poorer households on average than male loanees.

An analysis of the qualitative interviews offers a clearer picture of what these various categories of expenditure meant in terms of people's lives. For those who were extremely poor prior to accessing loans, 'consumption' expenditure related to improvements in very basic survival needs: food, clothing and housing. It meant being able to eat three times a day instead of only once or simply going hungry; and of being able to do so without having to beg or to borrow from neighbours. Clothing is a practical need for both women and men but for women to be able to function in society, to literally 'go into society without shame' (Sen, 1987), there is a more complex set of clothing needs because of the social requirements of modesty. One female household head described how before she had access to loans, she and her mother had one saree between them so that when she went out, her mother had to stay at home wrapped up in a quilt.

The other form of loan-related income basic 'consumption' occupied an intermediate status between basic need and durable asset. Women loanees were more likely than men to use their loans for housing related needs: building their own or adding or improving to the existing stock. The basic needs aspect of this was emphasized in many accounts where women described how their roofs had leaked when it rained and how the wind came in through the cracks in the walls. The importance of owning a decent home of your own, however, had more than a purely practical value as F31 pointed out: *We used to have a thatched house, no one gave us any respect. If you have no house of your own, will you get respect?*

Beyond basic needs, security-related use of income related to savings in a variety of forms: either in the form of cash which was kept at home, saved in neighbourhood saving groups or lent on to relatives, neighbours or members of the community often at precisely those exorbitant informal rates from which the loanees themselves had been rescued from by SEDP lending. Alternatively; it was used to purchase small livestock and poultry which could be easily translated into cash should the need arise; or it was saved with neighbourhood savings societies or as a bank savings account. The use of income to purchase of homestead land or to purchase or mortgage in cultivable land had a dual significance: as source of income but also as a security-related asset. Re-investment in own businesses, a common use of enterprise profit reported by men, was another means of underwriting household security.

Finally, there were also examples of use of loan-related income to finance forms of 'social' expenditure, often related to considerations of status and self-esteem, particularly among those whose basic survival needs were not in question. Better, as opposed to basic, clothing and housing often served to signal improvements in status to others in the community as did social expenditures on hospitality or in marrying off children. While dowry was rarely an optional element of marriage expenditure, the burden and consequences of dowry payments were lessened for both male and female loanee accounts by access to loans. As one woman pointed out, without the loans, her family would have had to sell their land in order to pay dowry for their daughter.

## **8. Enhanced self-worth and transformed meaning of work**

There is therefore fairly unequivocal evidence that the increased levels of income made possible by access to SEDP loans led directly to improvements in the standard of living of most of the loanees we interviewed – male as well as female – although the actual dimensions

of living standards prioritised varied by class and gender. We turn next to forms of impact which are either not directly 'purchaseable' or else related to the intangible implications of purchaseable impacts. The first relates to the question of women's workloads. As we saw, all three of the negative evaluations of credit cited earlier speculated on the likelihood of intensified work burdens, fatigue and malnutrition for women in the wake of their access to credit. In this, they were echoing the wider gender and development literature in which there are constant references to the problem of women's double and triple work loads. However, there is a need for caution in applying this generalised insight to the specific contexts of countries like Bangladesh.

One of the most important impacts which emerged out of the interviews, and one which mediated many of the other effects discussed in the following sections, related to women's enhanced sense of self-worth, of bringing something of value to their households. The particular significance of this impact has to be understood in the broader context of the increasing monetization of the Bangladesh economy where the customary division of labour, resources, responsibilities and constraints nevertheless persists and positions women and men differently, and unequally, in taking advantage of new opportunities thrown up by these changes (Lindenbaum, 1981). Men have been privileged in accessing those opportunities for which they are equipped by their class and education, but women remained largely confined to the precincts of their homesteads, disadvantaged in access to education and other market-related credentials and dependent on male members of their family for provision and protection (Kabeer, 1991; Lindbaum, 1981). That the combination of female seclusion, confinement to the margins of the labour market and household assetlessness has made the lack of productive opportunities the most pressing problem for women, particularly poorer women, received recent support from a national participatory assessment exercise among poor sections of the population in Bangladesh carried out by the UNDP (1996).

In the context of the present study, the point is not that women loanees in my sample were idle prior to their access to credit. Most were involved in domestic chores as well as in indirectly productive work (raising poultry; collecting fodder and fuel; processing crops where their husbands owned land). The point is that these activities were generally unremunerated and received little social recognition. What became clear from the women's accounts is that they too appeared to share the low social value which was given to these forms of labour. Access to loans have given women the opportunity to make what many described as a 'proper' economic contribution to the household, either by taking up an income-earning activity for the first time or else turning a previously small-scale, low-productivity

activity into a viable business venture or even, in a small minority of cases, simply by having brought in a loan. While many studies on gender relations in Bangladesh have pointed to the operation of these gender-specific constraints and their dependency implications for women, few have explored what such dependency might mean as a 'lived' experience. Where space *is* given to women's voices, it becomes very clear that for many women, the status of being a supplicant in relation to men is galling and humiliating, particularly as in contexts of scarcity, where they have to literally plead for every *poisha* (penny) to meet basic food and other needs. It helps us to appreciate the importance that women attached to their new identities as bearers of valued economic resources and their consequent enhanced sense of self-worth. This was particularly evident in the transformation of the meaning and experience of work that many women loanees reported, even where it entailed, as it often did, an increase in their workloads:

*F3: My work has increased but the pleasure comes from the work. I do this work all day and all night and it keeps me happy.*

*F8: My labour has increased because now we buy more paddy, there is more paddy to boil. We couldn't afford to buy much before. Yes, it is harder work, but can you get money without hardship.*

*F43: Ideas of the mind is everything. If you have money in your hand, you feel joy. If you have no money, you feel pain. My labour has increased, but I don't feel it because the money is also coming in. It doesn't feel like hard work.*

*F39 : My labour has increased, my husband can also see that...I have less time to do the usual things so he is more tolerant. My labour has increased, but it means we are better off. You need to work. Now we have bought a loan and put it to work, if we have to work harder, that makes no difference to me, we do it with pleasure. The pleasure is that I do the work and I will make an extra bit of money. This was not the case before. The problem before was that I would think I need 500/- for something, but where would I get the money from. We would have to borrow it. Now we are in position to lend.*

## **9 Gender, voice and agency within the household**

A second important impact which women attributed to their access to SEDP lending was a greater voice in household decision-making processes. The quantification of decision-

making featured as an impact in all three of the positive evaluations cited earlier. It also emerged as a factor in the qualitative assessments by women themselves and was backed up by my survey findings. The analysis here will help to provide a more disaggregated insight into the meaning of the quantitative version of this impact: in other words, how and why access to credit translates into an enhancement of women's role in intra-household decisionmaking. As far as the survey was concerned, loanees were asked an open-ended question about how decisions were taken at different stage of loan utilisation. Theoretically, their responses placed somewhere on a continuum between those who exercised very little say in any form of decision-making at one end and those who played a dominant role in household decision-making at the other. However, for purposes of the analysis, I have attempted to capture this continuum rather simplistically through the imposition of three decision-making categories at the data coding and analysis stage: women who played a minimal role in different arenas of household decision-making; those who described a joint role in decision-making; and those with a major role in decision-making. The distribution of male and female loanees between these categories is summarised in Table 9.

Some clarification is necessary here. I had initially sought to include questions about decision-making in relation to use of loan and management of enterprise in the quantitative questionnaire but the qualitative interviews in Mymensingh where the first phase of field work was carried out indicated that decision-making in relation to the proceeds from a loan-assisted enterprise was a third area where women considered that their voice had substantially increased so this question was added on to the subsequent survey in Faridpur. Yet a fourth dimension of decision-making which emerged as significant by the end of the Faridpur field work related to the decision to take a loan in the first place and I will be discussing the significance of this for the concerns of this paper later in the analysis.

In the meanwhile, Table 9 makes it clear that access to credit has not obliterated gender asymmetries in decision-making: male loanees are much more likely to be the main or unilateral decision-maker in relation to loan use, enterprise management as well as the allocation of profits (at least in Fardpur where this last category of data is available), while female loanees are much more likely to report joint decision-making in relation to their loans. A small percentage of both men as well as women also report 'others' as the main decision-maker in all three stages of decision-making. For both men and women, these 'others' were likely to be other male household members. Thus one striking finding of the table is that men take a much greater part in making decisions related to women's loans than women do in decisions relating to men's loans. As we noted earlier, quite aside from prevailing ideologies

about the authority of the male household head, the greater involvement of men in decisions about women's loans also reflects their greater involvement in women's enterprises as well as the greater likelihood that some of women's loans may be invested in male-dominated enterprise.

However, asymmetries in the impact of male and female loans on intra-household decision-making should not negate the importance of the other striking feature of Table 9 which is the high percentage of female loanees who describe themselves as either main or joint decision-makers in relation to the use of loans; the management of enterprise, and, where the data is available, the allocation of proceeds from the enterprise. The clear difference in decision-making processes reported by male and female loanees offers one form of evidence that access to credit may indeed have made a difference in women's ability to exercise 'voice' in household decision-making processes. There is, of course, likely to be a certain amount of normative influence in the responses given so that women may over-emphasise, while men seek to underemphasise, women's voice in decision-making, but this is unlikely to alter the findings radically and in any case, as I shall show, the findings are basically supported by the qualitative data. The other point to note is that while there appears to be a loose relationship between all three points of decision-making, women's participation in decision-making likely to be lowest at the enterprise stage and that in Faridpur, where responses were recorded for all three points of decision-making, 'jointness' around decision-making was much higher around the disposal of income from loans for both female loanees and to much lesser extent, also male loanees. 45% and 50% of female loanees in Faridpur reported 'joint' decision-making with regard to the *use* of the first and second loans respectively while 63% and 65% of women reported joint decision-making in relation to how loan-funded enterprise income flows were to be utilised. It would appear therefore that one important mechanism explaining the finding reported in a number of evaluations that the gender of loanee makes a difference to patterns of individual as well as household expenditure, investment and savings outcomes is the greater part that women play in decisions related to the allocation of proceeds from the use of their loans, regardless of how the loan was used and who used it. To find out what is meant when women describe themselves as having less or more voice in household decision-making, I would like to match some qualitative accounts of decision-making to the quantitative outcomes reported both in order to explore these meanings in more detail and to draw out what they tell us about women's assessment of their changing position within their household.

### **Women as marginal decision-makers**

There appeared to be three different sets of factors at work among women who described themselves as exercising very little voice in household decision-making processes. For a small group of women (3 out of the 50 we interviewed), lack of voice reflected the straightforward male appropriation of their loans and its investment in undertakings in which women had little or no role. The interviews also suggested that these women had not in fact played a particularly active role in the decision to seek out loans so that male loan appropriation in these cases often reflected a fairly marked pre-existing inequality of agency within the household which women's access to loans did little to alter. One example of this category was F44. She made pottery at home while her husband worked in a rice mill. She had taken a loan of 7000/- 3 years ago but her husband had lent out 4000/- of it to an acquaintance at bazaar interest rates. The acquaintance had failed to return either the principal or the interest and they were now well behind on their repayments. The rest of the loan had been used to expand her pottery business and some repayments had been effected from this income. Her husband had, and still did, make most of the decisions in the household: *My husband does all the selling, either from the house to the middle man or in the market. He earns and he manages everything....the money is with him, he keeps the accounts. I never ask him how we are doing, he is my husband, why do I need to ask. And if I ask about the lost money, he gets angry. It was a mistake. He sent me to get the loan, he makes all the decisions. He sent me, because he is at work all day. Has my value increased? I gave my loan to my husband, how can my value increase?*

A second set of factors explaining why some women loanees played very little role in loan-related decision-making was illness or disability. F19's first loan of 5000/- had been used for bamboo production which both she, her husband and her children had done together. However, she began to go blind in one eye so that her second loan was wiped out by medical expenses and paid for out of her husband's earnings. Since then, two more loans had been registered in her name, but both she and her husband confirmed that he was the one who decided its use and used it. She could no longer do any bamboo work or any other economic activity and her husband answered most of the questions at the interview and said: *The loans are in her name, but I am the one who uses it.* F23 was described by her husband as suffering from 'lack of concentration'. She was not able to provide any information about her loan use or returns, although her husband's presence during the interview and continual insistence on answering our questions made it impossible for her to give any response. She said, *'He can tell you everything, my head is not good'* while her husband said that her lack of concentration meant that she only provided labour into their joint-shared bamboo production; he took care of the rest. My own analysis of the situation, based on the interview interactions, was this

could well have been a case where the husband had taken over his wife's loan without her offering much resistance.

Finally, there was a third group of women who appeared to have handed over full responsibility for decision-making to a male household member either because they did not want to take, or because they did not feel capable of taking, the responsibility themselves. F38, an older woman, had taken 5000/- and then 10,000/-, investing them in paddy husking and the purchase of a cow. Her husband was now elderly and spent his time praying. It had been her idea to take a loan - she had observed her neighbours doing it - but the entrepreneurial decisions were taken largely by her son-in-law who lived with them and was described as 'like a son'. As he put it: *I am the one who manages the business so I take responsibility for the repayments. Take it that my mother-in-law has taken the loan but I manage it, I keep the money and the household budget, I make the decisions.*

Similarly, F2, who had taken four loans, offered an account of decision-making within the household in which she played very little role. Two of her loans had been used for paddy processing, one to purchase cows and the last one to invest in a group purchase of a shallow irrigation pump, her share being registered in her husband's name. She provided significant amounts of labour into paddy processing and livestock care and it had been her idea to purchase the cows - *'of course it was my idea. I have ideas, don't I?'* - but both business and household accounts were with her husband and son, and her husband took the main decisions. She explained: *What need do I have to do that? Even if I die, my husband will continue to take responsibility for my children..... I keep the money, but it is his responsibility to spend it so it does not stay too long with me.*

### **Women as joint decision-makers**

According to Table 9, 'joint' decision-making in loan use was described as a common practice among about 40-50% female loanee households. We noted earlier that there is a tendency among some researchers to consider 'joint' decision-making a disguised form of male-dominated decision-making. The qualitative accounts given by the female loanees suggest that such a simplified interpretation is not warranted and point to perceived and actual 'jointness' of interests in the management of the household economy which underpinned what appeared to be genuine cases of 'jointness' in decision-making.

For some women, the 'jointness' of household interests was never at issue. As F40 put it, *I may have brought the loan, but I have brought it with my husband*. F16 also stressed the interdependence of interests within her family:

*Before we could neither work nor eat. It is a matter of shame....When a household begins to sink, it is difficult to get it afloat again. I used the loan to expand my business...I made that decision myself. The profit stays with me. I keep all my accounts. When he needs money for his trade, he takes it from me, then when he makes a profit, he returns to me. I keep accounts in my head....I can remember how much my husband takes, how much I make. We are in the same household, when I need something, I give him the money and he brings it. We manage our own lives, we don't rely on any one. We are one household*

In other cases, 'jointness' reflected women's awareness of their reliance on male family members, usually their husband, to realise the full value of the activity to which their loan was being put. The following extract from the interview with F40 illustrates how some of these considerations operated in constructing 'separate' and 'joint' forms of decision-making within the same household:

*We had cows and calves before, but they were my husband's. We used to sell milk sometimes and drink some ourselves as well...I have bought cocks and ducks and goats with my second loan and with the third, I bought a cow and also gave my husband some money for his wood business....My husband also takes decisions to do with looking after the cow, but with the goats and poultry, I decide. You see, the cow has to be taken out in the morning and brought back in the evening, and if some man comes to buy the milk, well, I am a woman, I can't go in front of him, my husband has to do the talking and running around. He has a role in it. I may get my husband to take my goats to the bazaar for sale, but I make all the decisions about it'.*

F33 also made a distinction between loan decisions she could make on her own because of her relative independence in managing the investment in question and loan decisions which required a consensus because she would have to rely much more on her husband: *I made the decision to use the loan to buy the cow but when we decided to take in land on mortgage, we had to decide together or it would lead to quarrels. And if I go against my husband, how am I going to manage to pay it off? So we discuss most things together. We have to agree, we can't act separately.*

The other factor at play in creating this greater 'jointness' in decision-making was the explicitly stated perception by many women that access to credit had helped to transform their role in the household economy from a marginal, and essentially passive one, to that of significant economic actors and that this entitled them to a more central role in its decision-making processes. F21 had used her first loan of 20,000/- to purchase a cow and gave her second loan of 30,000/- to her husband to invest in his perishable food business. Although he ran the business, she remained involved: *I keep an eye on his business, how it pays, what is bought, what is sold. After all, I have to make the repayments... We sold the cow for 20,000/- and bought a shop for him in the bazaar and we bought some homestead land - 13 kata - in my name... I keep the money; he takes it as he needs it.*

F27 had taken a loan of 12,000/- with she purchased a cow which she sold and, pooling the proceeds with her son's savings, had mortgaged in land which her husband cultivated. Her son's income was used to repay the loan. According to her: *My husband didn't take the loan because if I bring it and then even if I let my husband use it, I can keep track of it, how did he use it, what did he get...If he had taken it, I would not have exercised any control. I want another loan, make more profit, perhaps buy some more land, it might be in my name, or in his. All the household income comes to me..we work out which day he earns 50; which day he earns 100.*

F10 had relinquished all her 3 loans to her husband and son to build up 'our' shop, but she nevertheless saw herself as playing an important role in household decision-making. It had been her idea to take the loan - she felt her son would ensure that the repayments were made on time even if her husband did not - but she played no role in the enterprise: *I am just at home, I don't do anything. The entire loan is with my husband. But he gives me the monthly repayments on time - absolutely serially - it comes from the shop. I don't do any business. Why should I lie? I stay within the home and my husband and son keeps things going.* Although she did not participate in the enterprise, she knew the broad uses to which the loans were put and she clearly had a say in how its profits were spent: *With the loan, I have improved our situation in every way. We eat better food, wear better clothes.. the other day I sent my son to get the tin to put up a new ghor'... the children are being educated..Since the loan I have also put in a tubewell for us.I had to bring the drinking water from along way away, from the river near the bazaar. That work has been reduced.*

#### **Women as primary decision-makers:**

Women who described themselves as primary decisionmakers were analytically the most interesting from the point of view of this evaluation since they appeared to go most clearly against the grain of male-dominated decision-making processes which typify Bangladeshi households. Here again, in-depth analysis suggests that 'main decision-making' by female loanees did not reflect a uniform set of factors. The first and most predictable category of women in this group were those who headed their own households and were responsible for earning its livelihood. Their key decision-making roles were largely a reflection of the absence of husbands. A second and less expected category of women were those who explained their key roles in household decision-making in terms of their greater entrepreneurial competence compared to other family members, an opinion which appeared to be supported by other family members. During the interviews, these women all stressed their ability to take the initiative and to manage the households' business affairs. F11's loans were divided between paddy husking business, purchasing a rickshaw which was registered in her name and which her husband pulled and marrying off two daughters. She also had taken the initiative in applying for an SEDP loan (or ABCD loan, as she referred to it) when she heard about the facility:

*The money from our business stays with me. When my husband needs it, he asks for it. He is not so good with accounts, so it all stays with me...I memorise the accounts, I can't read or write. 7000/- worth of business is not so much that you need to write it down. ...My husband knows whatever I do. He will never stop me from doing anything, whatever I say, he goes along with. I take all the business decisions. I keep all the hisab. If I tell him not to go to the bazaar today, he will not go.*

Her daughter who was present during the interview added: *My mother has got a head for business. She used to be simple before, but doing the accounts has made her smart.*

F31 took on responsibility for her household gradually over time. She had been abandoned by her husband soon after their marriage and had been rescued from throwing herself and her baby in front of a train by the local Chairman of their union who had brought her into local union affairs to build up her self-confidence. Her access to loans marked the beginning of her financial headship of the household and she attributed it to her greater ability to manage the household and business financial affairs: *I am the main decision-maker in our household. My brother earns, puts it in my hand. My father is not too brainy, neither is my older brother, he just works for 10 or 12 days a month. My younger brother is brainy, but he listens to me. I decide how to use my loan.*

F18 described herself as a 'simpleton' before she starting to borrow from SEDP. She first learnt to think like an entrepreneur after having attended the SEDP training and she acquired the rest of her business sense experimenting to find the most profitable use of her loan:

*Officially, I took the loan for paddy husking but I found that to be hard work for very little money so I ended up buying a cow. After all, you must invest the money where it makes most profit. Before the loan, I had to beg from all sides in order to survive. Now with the 7000/- profit from the loan, I have taken 7 kata land in on a mortgage basis. It is my land, it was my idea; I am the one who found the route to getting capital. Now I am the one who manages the household. I bring in the money. Before I got the loan, I was a haba (simpleton). Now I worry all the time about making my repayments. It would be dishonourable if I don't, so I keep calculating, if I buy a hen today, tomorrow it will make a profit. Before I had no ideas, I was like a child. But since the loan, I have started thinking differently, I have started thinking about how to make your money work for you. We both keep the accounts, we work together, My husband never questions me. He keeps his earnings with me. I have saved 20,000/- takas,; it is kept with my sister's son. My husband agreed, he knows if you keep money in the house, you spend it uselessly.*

F20 was also described by her daughter described as the 'smart' partner in her marriage while she herself told us her husband as more interested in his prayers than in business matters. . By and large, it was clear from her account that while she consulted her husband on many decisions, he was happy to leave things to her:

*My husband didn't want to take the loan, he said it would make no difference if it came to me or him. We decide both together how we are going to use the loan, but if there is a disagreement, he will go by my wishes, he is a very religious and peaceful man, he says prayers a lot. He would never over-rule me. I keep the household accounts. I keep the money with me, I buy a hen or a goat whenever I see the opportunity. I sell the milk myself to people in our neighbourhood, even if we get a taka or two less for such sales, it is more convenient when one is busy. My husband sells our rice in the bazaar, I never go to the bazaar.*

F7 was one of a small group of women I interviewed who had been conducting her own 'ferrying' or itinerant trading business before the loan, but whose value and 'voice' had been enhanced as a result of her access to organizational credit. She had taken 3 loans which she had used to expand the working capital for her ferrying business, to purchase 3 cows and 2 kata of homestead land and also to finance her children's education: one son was about to do

his matric and she hoped to educate her daughter at least till Matric. She described herself as the entrepreneur of the family: *My husband did not take a loan because he catches fish and pulls a rickshaw. I am the one who does the business. I heard about the loans from the women with whom I travel to Tongi to buy goods.....All the money is with me. You see that trunk we have bought. The key for that is with me. The money from my business is kept there and I repay my loan from that.....We decided together about buying cows but it was my idea. I go around from village to village, so I get ideas. I explained to my husband if we spend 4000/- now, then in a year we will have 10,000/- worth of livestock.... If both husbands and wives put their heads together and work for the prosperity of the family, then it will thrive. If the husband goes one way and the wife another, will that shongshar (household economy) prosper?*

An important point to make about many of the women in this category is that while access to loans may have expanded their sphere of decision-making, many of them were already exercising considerable voice within their own households on their basis of their recognised managerial skills. This should not, however, negate the importance of credit in their cases since it allowed them to realise their hitherto suppressed entrepreneurial potential but it does mean that the extent of voice that they exercised within their households cannot be attributed solely to their access to credit. On the other hand, there were others like F45 who made a very clear link between their present 'voice' and the improvement in their earning power as a result of their loans: *My say has increased now that I know how to earn. I did not used to say much but now I am malik (mistress) of my own shongshar (household economy).*

Finally, a third category of women describing themselves as making key decisions were those who had extremely conflictual, often violent, relationships with their husbands. While violence within marriages cropped up frequently in our interviews, very few women had walked out of their marriages in response to such violence. We did come across two cases where female loanees who had helped their daughters to leave violent or irresponsible husbands, but none of the loanees had left their own marriages. Instead, what we found was that in such cases, women used their access to loans to create a relatively clear cut sphere of autonomy for themselves *within* the marriage, based on as much of a separation of finances and decision-making as they deemed their marriages would bear. Three of the loanees stood out as examples of this strategy. All three described marriages of terrible violence and in all three cases, the effect of women's enhanced economic capacity was not merely restricted to lessening violence but also to enabling women to live more independent lives *within* their marriages.

F15 had first gone to live with her husband's family after her marriage. He had been extremely abusive and violent, beating her regularly. However, he fell out with his brother and came away with his wife to her village where her father gave them a miniscule piece of land to put up a home. His violence towards her lessened somewhat now that they lived on her father's land. She worked as casual labour in other people's houses while he traded in perishable vegetables. She had used her loan of 15,000/- from SEDP to repay a previous debt to her sister, repair their home, purchase a rickshaw and set up a bamboo craft business. The rickshaw was registered in her name and hired out in return for daily rent. It was clear that she kept her loan-funded activities as separate as possible from her husband, taking unilateral decisions about how the loan would be utilised, sole responsibility for its repayment and deciding largely on her own how her proceeds would be spent:

*My husband would not try and tell me what to do with the loan or ask for money for me. All the household expenses are my responsibility. All the household income is with me....I have learnt accounts since I took the loan. I keep it all in my head. I can't write. My husband can write so he also keeps track. If I take another loan, I will buy two more rickshaws and continue with the bamboo work.*

F29's husband used to be a truck driver. He earned well, his family had land and she did not have to work. However, he had been extremely violent towards her and she suffered regular beatings. However, as a result of gangrene, he had to have both his legs amputated, an event which began their descent into poverty as they sold off all their land and assets to pay for his medical expenses. His physical violence diminished as a result of his disability but his abusive behaviour continued. As a woman who was considered beautiful married to a man who could no longer perform as a satisfactory breadwinner but treated her abusively, why had she not left him? Her answer was simple: *Love for my son. How could I leave my husband? I would have to leave behind my only son and he was only five. Even if he had been ten years old, who would have looked after him? And I could not take him with me if I remarried. And even if I could, would some other man have understood his worth?*

Instead, she earned their living initially by begging, then working as a domestic. Finally, she used her savings to set her husband up with his own fish trade at their local bazaar while she herself sat under a tree near the bazaar and sold a few onions and garlic. The idea of taking a loan came from the local SEDP field officer who passed her little stall on the way to work. F29 used 5000/- of her first loan of 15,000/ to expand her husband's fish business and

10,000/- in purchasing herself a 'position' within the main bazaar where she set up her own grocery shop. She invested the second loan of 15,000/- entirely in her shop. Her account made clear that she made most of her financial decisions independently of her husband, although she had used loan money to help him out:

*I decided myself how the loans would be used....Now I am on my third loan - 40,000/-, I am using it myself. My husband does not take four annas from my shop. All the outgoings and incomings I deal with. He pays for our food and clothing from his shop while I have bought things for the house - tape, TV - I have paid to get my son trained as a carpenter in Dhaka, I have bought my husband a wheel chair from Khulna which he can manage himself. I am not interested in raising cows or anything. I am busy enough with my shop and managing the house.*

F48 was a third example of a woman who had used her access to loans to enhance her autonomy vis-a-vis a violent and irresponsible husband. When they married, he was pulling a rented rickshaw in Khulna for a living but he refused to work on a regular basis and there was never enough to eat. She left him in anger when her new-born son died of hunger: *For lack of rice my middle son died, he just faded away like the full moon. He was a month old, I did not get enough to eat, how could I produce milk to feed him.* She returned to her own village, where her cousin gave her some land to put up a shelter, and began earning a living as a servant in the domestic quarters of a local hospital. Her husband followed her to Faridpur but his behaviour remained unchanged.

When she took her first loan from SEDP at the suggestion of the local field officer, she took steps to make sure that her husband could not get his hands on any of the money: *I knew my husband was no good, that the loan would be my responsibility. If he ever got hold of the money, he would have headed for the nearest bazaar, broken into the money, spent it all, had a good time. He is of the driver's jat (caste), they like to eat well. He used to drink before, whatever he earned he would blow it all on drink and then I would have to beg for the money.* Her account clearly illustrated her determination to use her loans as independently of her husband as possible and the strategies she adopted to ensure that none of her resources fell into his hands. It also traced her growing self-confidence as she took on increasing responsibility for her children's welfare and finally, for her husband.

She got her cousin to help her use her first loan of 6000/- on purchasing a cow and feed for the cow. She continued to work in people's houses to make her repayments till the cow started

to produce milk. She sold the milk herself, taking orders and delivering milk to local houses and then collecting her money at the end of the month and immediately paying it to the bank for her repayments. If her husband sometimes asked for money, she would lie to him about how much she had. Any cash she had was kept with her sister-in-law rather than in her own house. She pooled her income from selling the cow and her savings from her domestic work to purchase a rickshaw. She registered it in her own name ('so no one could sell it off') but gave it to her son to pull. He gave her a portion of his daily earnings which she also paid into her account, while she paid for household expenses out of the savings she kept with her sister-in-law.

She was on her fourth loan of 24,000/- when we interviewed her. By this time, she was managing the household budget, had set her husband up in a business, was consulted by her sons on most decisions and had managed to send her daughters to school:

*My courage has increased step by step, loan by loan... I keep all the household accounts. If my son wants a lungi, he says, mother buy me a lungi. My husband's lungi, shirt, I buy it all. Soap, oil, whatever, they ask me. I give the money or if I cant, I explain that a repayment is due and I dont want to fall short by 50/-. If I buy oil, I will have to buy one poa less than needed. I would have 20 less or if I go to buy soap, I have 16/- less. So then I don't buy it now, I get it later. You cant tell anymore which business the repayments are coming from. All the incomes are pooled and I am trying to repay the loan as quickly as possible.*

## **10 Gender, voice and decision-making in male loanee households.**

The analysis of these first-hand accounts of decision-making has focused so far entirely on the accounts of female loanees to explore the impact of loans on those who are most likely to have been denied 'voice' in household decision-making. However, it is also worth making some observations on the basis of the 20 in-depth interviews with male loanees or with members of their family.. As we saw, women members in male loanee households appeared to have very little say in most aspects of decision-making. Male loanees did not have to rely on female family labour for their enterprises in the same way that female loanees relied on male family labour and hence there was neither practical nor normative imperative to ensure women's willingness to co-operate. Where women did provide labour to the enterprises of male loanees, it tended to be in a fairly restricted capacity,: cooking for extra workers; adding the finishing touches to a garment; assisting with pottery or weaving or livestock care. This

group of male loanees were consequently the primary and often sole breadwinners of their families, a role which they saw as the basis of their dominance in intra-household decision-making processes. A noticeable number of this group of men said that they were against their wives taking up income-earning activities and had explicitly forbidden them to take out their own loans; indeed, their increased prosperity as a result of access to SEDP loans enhanced the material capacity to enforce this constraint. By and large, this group gave fairly unequivocal descriptions of male dominance within their households:

*I take the decisions about the business, she does what she understands, she doesn't get involved in extra jhamela (hassle). She has neither hisab or kitab (literacy or numeracy).. I take all the decisions around the house.*

*I make all the decisions about the business. I invest all my profits into my business. I also look after the household expenses, I keep the household budget....My wife is not involved on the business side, how can she be, she is a rural woman. She stays in the village and helps out with paddy work. But the household expenses are with me, when she needs money, I give it to her.*

Although we were not always able to talk to female members of male loanee households, it was clear from those we did talk to that while in some cases, their lack of participation in household decision-making was accompanied by an expressed lack of interest in many aspects of decision-making ('*what need do I have to keep accounts?*'), in other cases, their limited participation was a reluctant submission to the authority of the male household head. Thus, M1's mother who disapproved of his business decisions, told us that neither she nor his wife believed that their standard of living had improved as a result of his loan but rather that their work loads had gone up, cooking for the additional labour he had taken on. As far as decision-making was concerned, he had forbidden his wife to take out a loan in her own name and, as his mother described, he made all the key decisions within their household:

*All the household expenses are kept in his hand. Neither his wife nor I have anything to do with it.....His wife did think about getting a loan herself, but he wouldn't let her. He thought, what need is there for my wife to go earning money outside. She would have used it to set my younger son up in a business of his own, her husband doesn't need it, but she could have helped the younger brother. And we have room to raise poultry, she could have managed it...I have a lot of fights with him over this, but he has scattered everything in too many directions. His wife also tells him off, but he doesn't listen....She*

*gets angry. She has taken out a life insurance, she needs to pay for it, he says, you dont need life insurance, close it down. She has to give money every six months, 3700, there is a payment coming up, that is why she is nagging him..If she had a loan, she would have invested it in the furniture shop, the furniture shop is all profit, no loss, she would have used the money from the shop to pay off the loan and put it toward the children's expenses.*

However, as Table 9 showed, there was a number of cases, where male loanees reported joint decision-making and our qualitative interviews showed that it was often their wives who they were referring to. A common factor in these cases appeared to be that these women possessed the potential for making some form of economic contribution to their households, beyond that prescribed by the traditional gender division of labour. In some cases, women had taken loans of their own, from organisations like Grameen Bank or BRAC so that we were observing the effects of *their* access to credit on household decision-making. M11, for instance, ran his own tailor's shop. His wife had taken two loans from Grameen Bank which she had used for livestock. Their son helped her to sell the milk and she kept that income while he kept the money from his business. He described an amicable separation of accounts between husband and wife but with many forms of interchange:

*We keep separate accounts of our businesses and then compare notes. The profit from the shop, after loan repayment, goes on our household expenses. I don't give her any money for her repayments. In fact, she often gives me out of her profit. If I need it, or the household needs it, I take it from her. I might use it to buy cloth from Dhaka and then when I have sold it, I return the money. She studied till Class 5, but she can't read anymore. She keeps the accounts in her head and lets me know. My wife helps out in my business in her own way, she sends cooked meals to the shop on time, this is a big help. I discuss all my business matters with her.*

Education was the other factor which explained women's more active role in male enterprise. M8, who made mattresses for sale in his workshop, told us: *My wife keeps the household accounts; she is the one who decides how much of our paddy crop we will need for the year and how much we can sell. I give her whatever else is needed for our consumption. She is entirely involved with the household; she does not earn.. We used to have cows; she looked after them. She doesn't have to earn an income; she is working hard enough as it is. She has studied till class 5.*

M20 was even more explicit about his wife's contribution. She had completed primary education, while he was illiterate. He had started out extremely poor, working as hired labour for other people before he started up his own weaving business. Access to SEDP lending had transformed his business. He used to make a profit of about 1000/- a month, sometimes not even that. Within a year of his first loan of 20,000/-, his profits had gone up to 9000/- a month after repayments. Since his second loan of another 20,000/- his profits had gone up to 16,000/- a month and he was now on his third loan. His wife had earlier assisted him on the loom, but now he was able to hire 6 full time workers. She now kept the accounts for his burgeoning business. He reckoned that he had saved 3000/- a month on an accountant because of her and she had the additional qualification of being someone he trusted. He too described his business in partnership terms: *If my wife had not been educated, my business would not have progressed so far. In terms of managing our household, we do it together, how much we earned this month, how much our expenditure is, whether we should purchase this item or sell to that person.*

### **11. Mitigating dependency: perceived economic contributions and intra-household relationships**

Along with increasing women's voice in intra-household decision-making, another important relational impact reported was in the quality of intra-household relationships, particularly marital relationships. As primary, and often sole, breadwinners for their families, men in poorer households often had difficulties making ends meet and women were well aware of the stress and frustrations involved in this responsibility as well as of their own role as dependents in exacerbating it. Access to loans by women helped to lessen this burden because they were now able to share some of the responsibility of providing for the family. The way in which this translated into actual relational outcomes depended largely on how women's earlier dependency status was treated by the husband. In some cases, where it had led to tensions and anxieties over money, women tended to describe the change in terms of an increase in the value and affection they received from their husbands and other family members.

F10: *Of course my position has improved, before no one took any notice of me, now they do. That is also true of my husband. Before I did not get this much affection from my husband. Now I get love. There would have been no loan without me.*

F11: *Before husbands used to earn and that was how wives ate. But now he gives value, I have brought a loan, I am labouring equally with him, that is why he values me more ...Before he listened less, he had to labour alone. I was the mother of five daughters, he had to feed us all on his own. He has never hit me but he used to shout. Now all that has gone, we get by peacefully...My husband sees he is not earning alone, now I am also earning. Does this not increase my value. He works outside, I do what I can at home. He may be earning more but now I am also working, I am not sitting idly at home.*

F7. *We never had too many conflicts. My husband is a straight man, a completely straight man. But if you don't have money in your hand, does anyone love you? Today, if you have 10,000/- in your hand, everyone will love you. Now that I bring in money, that I earn so much, won't my husband love me more? Did he love me before? Well, the difference between then and now is like day and night. I did business before, but it was small business, 200-300, is that proper business? Now I work hard, I earn well, I do proper business, it is worth 3000-4000, wont he love me more?*

In some households, tensions over money had often spilt into outright conflict between husband and wife. In many of these cases, women loanees often made a direct link between the improvement in their economic situation and a gradual lessening of quarrels and abuse within the family:

F39: *Because of scarcity, relationships are spoilt. If you don't have money in your hand, there is a certain amount of restlessness. If you have money in your hand, then your mind and your temper remain stable. It is not as if we were in great need but there are always tensions between husband and wife, if one is late in coming, late in going, late in preparing the meal. That is not a problem now.*

F24: *Before we had scarcity. Suppose we needed 5 seers of rice, and he brought home 4 seers, we would be short of food,. the children's stomach would not be filled, they would cry and he would know why they were crying. I would keep it quiet, but the children would sometimes let it out. Now we sit down to eat together, those tears are gone. We eat properly, systematically now and there is no worry about food. He no longer has to worry about whether we have eaten or not. When he couldnt give the money, there would be words, I would say angry things to him, he would respond angrily: I don't have it, how can I give it. Now we dont have those words.*

Even more striking, perhaps, was the effect of women's enhanced economic contributions on intra-household relationships in situations where conflict between husband and wife had deteriorated into violence. The extent to which violence was a feature of marital conflict - or intra-household conflict in general - may have been under-reported in my interviews since for many women, it is a source of shame. At the same time, a surprising number were quite forthcoming with information on this issue when asked about any changes in their familial relationships as a result of their access to loans. The question of domestic violence cropped up sufficiently in the interviews to suggest both that it had been a significant problem in the past and that at least those forms of violence which stemmed from scarcity-related frustrations may have been reduced in the aftermath of women's access to SEDP lending. The link between credit and reduced violence was sometimes made directly and sometimes linked to women's enhanced contribution to household livelihoods:

*F19: Before we used to have fights, there was scarcity in the household, when I asked for food, he would beat me up. Now he does not beat me anymore. That is how I know he gives me value. Now I can produce income, I can contribute to the household.*

*F25: I used to go to the bazaar to sell the milk, to the field to cut stalks. People say, she did not have enough rice, now she is handling thousands. My husband did not have clean clothes before, now he has, and they know it is because of me. My husband acknowledges this. He does not raise his hand to me any more. Before he used to hit me, what could one do if one's husband hits one, what cana on do? In a house of scarcity, there is more kalankini. If he brought home four annas, and I couldnot buy enough rice, he abused me. The house where there is no scarcity, there is no abuse (kalam). Because of this scarcity, this poverty, the lives of the poor are so troubled. Poor people's minds are very simple, they do not have the complexities of the rich.*

F33's offered a more complex explanation of why she thought her husband no longer beat her. She saw it partly in terms of the attenuation of scarcity within the household; partly her husband's fear that her access to loans would dry up if the SEDP officials found out about his violence; and partly his fear that she now had a stronger fall-back position and might leave him if he made her suffer too much:

*F33: Of course things have changed. Before the way my husband beat me, we knew nothing, after the loan, he no longer says anything. I work, he works. Before he beat*

*me, there was no money in the house...now he sees I am earning, I am progressing, if he abuses me, they won't give the loans. That is why husbands no longer say very much. Now he does half the work and I do half the work. Abuse has lessened because of the loans. Men had value, women had none, they were kicked around and beaten up. Now husbands think if we beat up our wives, they won't give us loans, we will not survive. Now women can work and men can work and no one can abuse anyone. Scarcity is less and the violence has decreased. I used to sit at home, I did not want to go to the field for the cow, now I have the loan, I go into the field, I want to repay the money, my husband sees I am working as hard as he is. He thinks, if I make her suffer, she will leave me.*

The forms of violence discussed so far tended to be linked to scarcity and as such, did not appear to be regarded as exceptional in any way by the women. Indeed, there was a certain degree of understanding in the way that women explained why such violence occurred. These accounts of male violence differed from those given by the three women in extremely conflictual marriages mentioned earlier who characterised their marriages in terms of *exceptional* violence. It was *exceptional* in that it was not explained in terms of shared tensions and suffering in the context of household scarcity, as most of the other women had done, but in terms of the husband's character (abusive and foul-tempered) and habits (drink and drugs). Each of the three women described how the quality of their lives had been immeasurably improved as a result of the greater economic and personal autonomy that their access to credit had allowed them to achieve.

F15 offered us her own indicator of the difference made in her life by SEDP loans. She said her husband's violence towards her had already begun to diminish when they moved from his parental village to her father's village to set up home since now she had her own family networks to support her. However, after she began to bring in SEDP loans, not only did the violence come to an end, but he also started handing over all his earnings to her to handle. She made a clear causal link between reduction in domestic conflict, her greater primacy in household decision-making and her access to credit:

*He gives me more value since the loan, I know, because now he hands all his earnings to me. If I had not gone to the meeting, not taken a loan, not learnt the work, I would not get the value I have, I would have to continue to ask my husband for every taka I needed. Once I had a headache, I wanted one taka for a bandage to tie around my head, I wept for eight days, he still would not give me the money. Just one taka. Now I can buy the clothes I want, I can eat properly, if I want to buy something, I can do so. My husband*

*can no longer beat me at random, whenever the mood takes him. I have joined the samity, brought he loan, learnt the work, seen the world. I learnt that giving money to husbands who misuse it is not a good idea. Before my husband used to beat me when I asked him for money, now even if he doesn't earn enough every day, I can work, we dont have to suffer.*

In F29's case, her husband's violence towards her had diminished when he had lost his legs but he remained abusive. While she had stayed on with her husband, because of her young son, she remained bitter towards him and she related with satisfaction her ability to ignore his abuse and go her own way since her economic situation improved: *Now I am eating out of my own effort, I don't have to go to him for a single paisa...If before I said, we need money, he would get angry, now he can't. If he gives me money, then he gives it and if he doesn't give it, then he doesnt. It is all the same to me. My son is now doing his training in Dhaka so I don't have to cook his food. If my husband gives me money for the bazaar, I will cook for him, if he doesn't, I wont.*

Unlike the other two, F48 not only reported a reduction in her husband's violence towards her but also a positive, though gradual, improvement in their relationship. The contrast between her situation prior to getting her first loan and the situation she described at the time of the interview was remarkable. She described vividly their 'house of scarcity' (*abhaber shongshar*) and the terrible violence at her husband's hands. She described also the kinds of constraints which had prevented her from leaving him, despite the fact that she was virtually feeding herself and her children through her own efforts:

*How he would beat me, they were terrible beatings, he dislocated almost every joint in my body, I was even taken to hospital once. I still have the pains in my head. I cannot go out in the sun, if I do, I am blinded. They began when he split open my skull once. He would get hold of me like this and fling me across the room as if I was a cat. No one came to my assistance because he would abuse them as well. Why didn't I leave him? Where would I go? I had no food for my stomach, no oil for my hair, no clothes for my body... If I left him, how could I reach heaven? And if I left him, somebody would be pulling at me, somebody would be passing comments at me, but if I stayed and ate with my husband, I would get respect.*

She used her loans, first of all, to set up her own business and then to set up her sons in business and finally to set up her husband in a business. In other words, her strategy was to

use her loans to enhance her own economic self-reliance at the same time as she sought to increase the overall income of the household. His violence began to diminish in almost direct relation to her growing prosperity and independence and and by the time we interviewed her, their relationship appeared to have been restored to some harmony:

*My husband is working well now, he gives his earnings to me. Before he did not used to give it to me regularly. Now he doesn't drink any more and he has even reduced his biri smoking. I have cut it down, I have said I dont want to see you smoking, But he steals a little money and still smokes a bit, he can't do without it. And he used to drink in the beginning but not now..... And he has not raised his hand to me for the past 3 or 4 years. Not since the loan. His anger has subsided. Scarcity creates a lot of problems....If womankind has no money in her hand, mankind tolerates her less. When I had no money in my hand, he gave me no regard, now he sees the woman has money in her hands, so that now if anything happens to me, it is his head that hurts. That is how it seems.*

However, it is also worth discussing two exceptions to this general impression that credit reduced conflict within the household because of the added insight they provide into the relationship between power and conflict within the household. Both cases were those of female loanees who had reasonably harmonious relationships with their husbands but who nevertheless reported an *increase* in intra-household conflict because they felt that their loans entitled them to 'voice' their opinions in contrast to their earlier passivity in household financial matters. These exceptions remind us that intra-household conflict need not always have a negative interpretation since it sometimes represents contestation and resistance by less powerful members who had hitherto 'mutely' acquiesced to the dominant structures of decision-making within the household. F16, for instance, described a very peaceful relationship with her husband – *We never used to fight before, he has never laid a hand on me, people would look at us and ask, are we brother and sister? We didnt know what fighting meant.* – but that peace also rested on her passivity within household decision-making processes. However, with her new status as loan-recipient and entrepreneur, she had begun to express her own preferences with regard to household finances which inevitably brought her into conflict with her husband on a number of occasions: *Before we had nothing, so there was nothing to ask him to do. Since he does what I ask him to do, there is no reason to have a fight with him. But before there was nothing to tell him off about, now I sometimes do. When he spends the money, or wants to spend it, I have fights with him over that. Now I can tell him off if he is not using the money properly, I have brought the loan, so I have the courage to*

*speak up. I can tell him to do this or that, before I could not say anything, because we had nothing. Isn't there a value in that? Before there was nothing to fight over.*

F46 described the extent to which her supplicant status within the household had changed as a result of the increased income she was able to earn by setting up a home-based tailoring enterprise within their home: *Things have changed with my husband. I don't have to go to him for money, I often give him money. Before I had to take from him. If my clothes were torn, I had to wait till he bought me something new. I can now go and buy my own. I do by my own decisions, my husband also abides by them, he did not always.* As long as he had his government job, he had left her alone to pursue her own loan-utilisation strategies. But he had retired recently and was trying to get her to share her next loan with him so he could set up his own business. This had led to a rise in conflict between them because she was reluctant to lend him any money given his past record on repayments: *Now we are having more rows, because he doesn't have a regular income, he wants me to break into my money. But I want to save, to build a house. I once let him have some of loan, but he didn't give repayments so I made him give my money back.*

These contradictory examples serve a useful purpose. First of all, as exceptions, they remind us that no intervention is ever likely to have a uniform set of outcomes. Given the deep-rooted connection between patriarchal power and violence against women, credit is no more likely than any other intervention to eradicate either conflict within the household or violence against women but as the data provided in Hashemi et al as well as Schuler et al. also suggests, access to credit may have a powerful mitigating effect on forms of male violence, particularly those stemming from scarcity within the household. At the same time, evidence that some forms of conflict may increase in the aftermath of women's access to credit reminds us that interventions which alter the balance of power within households is unlikely to be a smooth and unproblematic process and it is likely to be contested, often violently, by those who feel that they stand to lose from it. While male violence has to be condemned, whatever form it takes, it has a very different meaning when it is in response to women speaking up for themselves for the first time in their marriages, challenging male authority, compared to when it is merely an exacerbation of old forms of violence or a reassertion of male power. A final point to note here however is that even those women in my sample who reported some increase in tensions with their husbands in the context of gaining access to credit, none of them reported an increase in violence, unlike those interviewed by Goetz and Sen Gupta or by Schuler et al. While this might reflect a greater reluctance to report on violence by women to whom it was actually happening – as opposed to those who were experiencing a decrease or

cessation in violence – analysis offered by SEDP loanees suggested that there might have been a real difference in the experiences of women borrowing from SEDP compared to women borrowing from poverty-oriented lending. I will return to this point in a later section of the paper.

## **12 Transformatory investments: economic security and fall-back positions**

Women's greater ability to exercise 'voice' in household decision-making processes as a result of their access to credit is clearly an important one in its own right for those who were previously disenfranchised in such processes. It also supports the idea that differences in household expenditure patterns by gender of the loanee noted earlier in the paper is indeed likely to reflect gender differences in allocational priorities. Here however I would like to consider certain categories of income use which did not merely reflect women's immediate allocational priorities but also had the potential for addressing some of the inequalities which underpin women's subordinate status within the family and community. The first of these relates to women's investment and saving strategies and confirms the findings in the positive evaluations cited earlier that access to credit by women appeared to enhance household and personal security assets. We noted earlier that women loanees tended to value security-related investments, once survival needs had been met, while male loanees were more likely to re-invest in their businesses. Tables 10 and 11 focuses more closely on explicit savings and investment behaviour among loanees. Table 10 shows that female loanees in Mymmensingh were most likely to save in the form of cash holdings at home (23%) while male loanees in Mymmensingh were equally likely to save in the form of cash and in bank accounts (17% and 20%). In Faridpur, female loanees were equally likely to save in the form of cash at home (16%); bank accounts (17% in their own names and 3% in others') and with local saving societies (18%) while male loanees were slightly more likely to save in a bank account (25%) than in the form of cash at home (18%) or with local savings societies (13%). The practice of 'secret' savings appeared to be a largely female one.

Table 11 shows the percentage of loanee households who had purchased homestead land (rather than inheriting or renting it) and the percentage of loanees who had registered homestead land in their own names. While land in general obviously occupies a special status in local consciousness as embodiment of wealth, security and status, it has hitherto largely been seen as a 'male' asset. Although women are entitled to half their brothers' share of property under Islamic law, this entitlement generally has not materialised in practice since

they have customarily waived it in favour of their brothers so as to ensure their brothers' protection should their marriages break down. The data in Table 11 offers direct evidence that women's exclusion from land, at least homestead land, is beginning to break down and it offers indirect evidence that women are using their loans to purchase homestead land in their own names. In Faridpur, 36% of female loanees reported that some or all of their homestead land had been purchased and 19% reported some or all of their homestead land was registered in their names. Among male loanees, 31% reported purchase of some or all of their homestead land and at least 74% reported some or all of their homestead land was registered in their names (this included inherited land). In Mymensingh, 41% of female loanees reported purchase of some or all of their homestead land and 29% had some or all their homestead holding registered in their names; among male loanees, 43% had purchased some or all of their holding and 64% had some of it registered in their names. For women, it should be noted that homestead land has a particular significance since it not only essential if they are to build their own homes and have an anchor within the community but also, given the home-based nature of most of their enterprises, it is an important productive asset for them. It is worth noting in this connection that the UNDP 1996 report cited earlier found that access to homestead land/housing were identified by poor rural women as the next most pressing problem after lack of productive opportunities.

Under what circumstances did women seek to register property or savings in their own name or under their own control? The purchase of productive assets, such as rickshaws, irrigation pumps and tractors which were clearly 'male' in terms of their likely user tended to be registered in a male family member's name precisely for that reason. Thus F6's reason for registering her share of an irrigation pump (purchased jointly with some members of her extended family) in her husband's name was simple: *'I have a husband, why should I give my name'*. F27 played a dominant role in deciding how the household income pooled under her management was to be allocated but saw no reason to register the homestead land, the van and the rickshaw which were purchased with the help of her loans in her own name: *My son's income, I keep aside to pay off the loan. He brings 20/- a day, that is 300/- a month. That takes care of the repayment. I bought the rickshaw and the van because....how long was they going to give labour on other people's land? I will buy more land, it might be in my name, it might be in his. Why should I put the land in my name, where is my husband going with it, my son will be the one to get it. He wanted to put it in my name but then my daughter would have got the main share. In his name, both son and daughter will get it.*

Her husband, who I interviewed separately, gave his own account of jointness of household interests and how it influenced the allocation of resources and responsibilities within their household: *All the household income is pooled with my wife, why not, where would she take it? I didn't take a loan, I don't want to do business, I just want to cultivate. We both decided together about buying the land. Why do women get loans, well, your wife is your wife, isn't she? She is not someone else's. Wherever he comes from, wherever she comes from, they are now married, there will be some love between them. Because of this love, the son will separate from his parents and eat with his own wife. Whatever she brings to the household is the same as what I bring.*

F13 used her third loan to purchase a rickshaw which was registered in husband's name. She explained why: *He told me to put it in my name, but the thing is that the rickshaw has a signboard with the owner's name and if people see it has a woman's name, they will say, look at that fellow, he pulls a rickshaw but it is in a woman's name. I found that shameful. He said, what does it matter, it is our area....but still..* However, although she had registered her rickshaw in her husband's name, and had a harmonious relationship with him, she still saved secretly on the side for emergencies, keeping aside 5 or 10 takas daily from the rickshaw money or the bazaar money her husband gave her and telling him it was all spent: *I keep it separate because otherwise if it is in front of him, he will use it up. I keep it with myself and lend it out to poorer people in the neighbourhood. Remember how I used to pay 20 takas interests out of every 100 I borrowed. Now I do the same and I save the interest. Suppose there is an illness or an emergency, we won't have to go to anyone else, we can fall back on it.*

Recognition of interdependency within the family, and women's reliance on men to realise the full value of their loans, also figured in explanations as to why women registered land in the name of a male family member, usually the husband. Reference was made to the husband's contribution to women's loan repayments, or in recognition of their sons' contribution to loan repayments, since it was widely believed that sons inherited a larger share of land from their father and daughters from their mother. This was the case with F7 who had used her second loan to purchase 2 kata homestead land which was registered in her husband's name: *I have two sons, if it is in their father's name, they will get the main share. If it is in mine, the girls will take it with them. Anyway, doesn't my husband work as well? He goes to Sylhet to pull a rickshaw; my son is also in the fish trade, he brings home 500/- a month which I use to repay the loan.*

Whatever the rationale offered, it remains true that the registration of assets in the name of the key male household member conformed to prevailing familial norms about authority and control within the household and that the rationale for doing so often reflected and reproduced gender asymmetries in opportunities and constraints within family and community. Male family members - sons and husbands - were most able to contribute financially to loan repayment and correspondingly were more likely to benefit from any gains made possible by the loans than, for instance, daughters. In the same way, certain forms of asset acquisition, although considered 'female' assets, did not constitute a departure from past practice. The purchase of small livestock and poultry with their loan income represented acquisition of a form of saving or asset which is traditionally under women's jurisdiction and we have already seen this was a fairly common use of women's loans. The practice of clandestine saving was another long-standing strategy by which women sought to ensure that they had ready funds in case of an emergency or to allow them some form of independent purchasing power when necessary<sup>3</sup>. The defining feature of such savings is that they could not be easily claimed by husbands and therefore could be used by the wife in accordance with her own priorities.

For the purposes of our analysis, therefore, the more interesting cases were therefore those where women's investment or savings strategies did represent a departure from past practice and in that sense represented the exercise of new kinds of choices. This was the case for instance in conflictual and violent relationships where the practice of clandestine savings became a covert declaration of independence rather than an attempt to retain some control over purchasing power. These savings were no longer the traditional miniscule amounts, the residual income after basic needs had been met, or the fistful of rice accumulated painstakingly on a daily basis, but substantial sums of cash. F29, instance, whose violent marriage we discussed earlier, kept her finances separate from her husband's and chose not to let him know about her various savings: *I have two DPS accounts in the bank and I save with our market samity (society). I also have saved 60,000/-, my husband knows nothing about that. I lend it to other business men and I get 50/- for 1000/-monthly. We are ignorant people, our money does not earn in the bank, but if I lend outside, I earn 250/- in 5 months for every 1000/- I lend.*

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<sup>3</sup> However, it may have been such a long-standing practice that it was no longer always 'secret'. One male loanee referred explicitly to his wife's 'secret' savings as something he had no objections to since he understood her need to have them: *'The money my wife gets from selling her eggs, she keeps that money herself, she saves it secretly. I don't know anything about it and I don't want to know. If it makes her happy to save in secret, that is fine, there is no problem. She is not taking it anywhere. And there is such a thing as a person's independence so it is fine.'*

Similarly, where women used to their loans to purchase 'male' productive assets, such as rickshaws, traditionally utilised by men, it was much more likely to be registered in the woman's name in the context of a conflictual relationship with husbands. Thus, both F15 and F48, who had suffered extreme violence in the past at her husband's hands, registered the rickshaws they purchased with their loans in their own names. F15 hired out her rickshaw in return for a daily rent while F48 registered it in her own name 'so that no one could sell it off', but gave it to her son to pull and took a daily contribution from his earnings. F4, whose husband had moved out to live with his second wife, registered her rickshaw in her own name – *I bring in the loan, I will be the one to make the repayments* – but handed it over to her son to run as his business. He too gave her regular contributions for the repayments.

Interestingly, however, when women reported on land being registered in their names, a practice which also represented an important break with the past, the decision to do so was rarely presented as an assertion of their individual interests. It was generally ascribed to husbands as an act of love or gratitude and often occurred along with the registration of other land in husbands' names:

*F16: My husband sold the land he inherited, put it together with our savings from the loan income and bought 14 kata of land: he put 4 kata in my name. After I bought the loan, he was so pleased that he got 4 kata of the land he bought registered in my name.*

*F25: We have recovered 6 kata of homestead land which we had mortgaged in the past, it is in my name now. He said to me, without you, I could never have managed. I did not want it but he forced me to register it in my name. It is his gratitude. (However, we have already noted that an account of 10,000/- in the bank in her name which she had kept from her husband).*

*F10. I am just at home, I don't do anything, the entire loan is with my husband...I can stay within the home because my husband and son keep things going. Seven kata for 3500/- for each kata. In husband's name. We have a daughter. My sons have said, if you put it in your name, she will get most of it. So I said, alright, you are labouring to feed us, it will go in your father's name. But there is 2 kata in their name and half a kata in the girls name. Tommorrw we are registering 3 kata in my name. My husband said, since we are making the repayments and you have the jhamela of the loan, the next land will be in your name.*

In some cases, women explained the registration of land in their own names as a way of ensuring their daughters got a share of the property. Thus, F8 had a son and a daughter but had registered the two kata of land bought with her loan proceeds in her name because of her daughter: *She has a future, girls get more from their mother's property..* F39 was the only female loanee who referred explicitly to the insecurities which underpinned her desire to have an asset, in the form of a savings account, in her own name. She had adopted a two-pronged strategy of investing in 'joint' assets (life insurance policy and mortgaged-in land) in her husband's name but also in an individual asset (a second life insurance account) in her own name, thereby both safeguarding her family's loyalties to her but also creating an independent resource for herself:

*I have saved what I could and made a life insurance policy, it is in his name and I am the nominee. That was for 50,000/-. I also took some mortgaged land with the loan money for 15,000/-. That is in my husband's name. Now I have raised 30,000/-. they have given 20,000/-. I put some in my own life insurance. It is for 30,000/-. Women have to look after themselves, can a husband and son do everything for them? These days, the left and right hand must work separately, they can't work together. Suppose something happens in future, where will I go? I don't want to have to suffer. Understanding this has determined my actions. He knows about the second account, but it is in my name. I didn't take the mortgage in my name, I have a husband, I have children, wont they be upset if I put it in my name. They will say, look we work to feed and clothe our mother, and she puts the land in her name. Then will they be around to bury me when I die?*

Whatever the rationales offered by women to explain the registration of land in their names, however couched in the language of joint familial interests, it remains the case that such action represents an important break with the past traditions which had militated against women owning property. The importance of such ownership was acknowledged explicitly by one male loanee who had registered one acre of the four acres he had purchased in his wife's name, both as recognition of her contributions to their joint welfare, but also to strengthen her bargaining position in the future, when he was no longer around:

*We have both worked hard. That is why I have put some of the land in her name, she has struggled along with me. If I die, my sons may not look after their mother or when they marry, their wives might misbehave with her. Now my sons will know she has property, their wives will know that their mother-in-law has property, they will give her importance. They will say, come and eat with us....*

### **13 Transformatory investments: closing the gender gap in education**

The second form of investment reported by women loanees which had the potential for transforming gender relations in the long-run was in girls' education. In many cases, children, particularly those with educated parents, were already attending school prior to loanees' access to credit. In fact, there was a strong relationship between the likelihood of children attending school and level of parental education. The correlation coefficients between loanees' education and gross enrollment rates for boys and girls were similar and statistically significant in both districts: .35 for boys and .25 for girls in Mymensingh and .39 and .25 in Faridpur.

However, in a number of other cases, it was clear that access to loans, and the enhanced income levels, which it generated, made education affordable where it previously was not. In some cases, this introduced a birth-order factor in educational differentials: education levels tended to be lower among older children whose school-going years co-incided with the pre-loan phase of the household lifecycle and higher among younger children who reaped the benefits of credit access. Of greater significance from the point of view of this paper is the fact that loan access also introduced a gender dimension to the decision to invest in children's schooling. Table 12 reports on mean 'gross enrollment rates', measured as boys and girls aged 6-18 within a household currently attending school as a percentage of boys and girls aged 6-18 present in that household, and suggests a number of patterns. First of all, enrollment rates for both boys and girls are considerably lower among female loanees in Mymensingh, identified as the poorest category in our sample of loanees, than any other category of loanee. Secondly, in both districts, gross enrollment rates for boys are higher on average than for girls among male loanee households, although the difference is negligible in Mymensingh. Thirdly, and most strikingly, in both districts, gross enrollment rates for girls are consistently higher than for boys in female loanee households. Apparently, female loanees value investment in girls' education to a greater extent than male loanees. It is worth noting that similar patterns were reported by Pitt and Khandker (1995, cited in World Bank, 1995, p. 36) where percentage increase in boys' schooling was 7% among male loanees and 6% among female while the percentage increase in girls' schooling was 3% among male loanees and nearly 5% among female. Not only should such results be valued in the light of the long-standing gender gap in education in Bangladesh but also in the light of the various transformatory effects attributed to female education, both by a wide-ranging body of academic findings and also, as I show below, by the female loanees themselves.

The qualitative interviews throw up a considerable number of examples of women sending their daughters to school because they could now afford it but also a few where daughters were withdrawn from school because of, or despite, access to loans. In the case of withdrawal of girls from school, this was generally related to the need to utilise their labour in loan-expanded enterprises managed by women. However, in many cases, the low value put by female (as well as male) loanees was not connected in any way with the loan but reflected a long-standing belief that investment of girls' education was a waste of money. Such beliefs was more frequently expressed by parents who themselves had little education and hence was most likely to typify female loanees in Mymensingh: *'She is only a girl, why should I spend money on her education'* and *'Village girls marry young, the Koran is enough for them.'*

Given that these attitudes have been the norm rather than the exception in Bangladesh, what is of particular interest is the finding that women loanees in both districts, but also to some extent, male loanees appeared to be increasingly acting against this norm. In many cases, women and men used their loans to realise, or make 'effective', a pre-existing demand for girls' education, a demand which in turn reflected what appears to be a wider set of changes in gender relations and in attitudes in Bangladesh. The following quotes testify to changing attitudes to the question of educating daughters are from female loanees and throw some light on why women might have stronger reasons for wanting to educate daughters than men did:

*If my girl wants to go on studying, she can. She has a future. Her husband will esteem her more if she works.*

*I hope to educate the girl till matric – then we won't have to pay too much dowry, just 2000 or 4000 takas instead of 10,000/-.*

*Nowadays, girls are getting educated and earning their own living. These days it is girls, rather than boys, because they have to earn to eat. Let her stand on her own feet.*

*I will educate all my 3 girls. It is not longer the old era, it is the era of education. They will stand on their own feet, not have to depend on their husbands.*

*We only have one daughter, she is in Class 6, I hope she will study till Matric. Let her get a job, she is daughter of a poor family, let her stand on her own feet...If you are illiterate, you cannot get by these days, we were illiterate, our parents did not understand.*

*The older girl only studied till Class 3, we were poor, how could we educate her? Now everyone is educating girls, now everyone is educated, girls as well as boys. Before this was not the case. There is no alternative but to educate. If the younger girl studies, she will be able to stand on her own two feet. Even if we marry her off, she will need an education. Before you could, now you can't.*

Some of these beliefs expressed by women loanees are likely to reflect a change in attitudes that seems to be quite widespread and hence might have been shared by male loanees: the idea that education enabled girls to marry more educated, and hence better-behaved, husbands, that less dowry would be asked of an educated bride, that husbands would respect a working woman; that it was no longer acceptable for women to be uneducated. However, the stress on 'standing on your own feet' both within marriage or in case the marriage failed is likely to be based on women's own bitter experiences of what it meant to be totally dependent on husbands for their every need, particularly at a time when marriage was no longer a very secure option <sup>4</sup>. Some women made the explicit equation between higher education, greater self-reliance within the marriage and reduced likelihood of abuse and violence: *I will educate my daughter as far as is within my means. The reason is that these days if you don't educate girls, you marry them off to some no-good boy who will beat them. Why should I get my daughter beaten?* This belief does of course receive some statistical backing from Schuler et al. finding cited earlier that women with some education were less likely to report having been beaten.

In addition, a number of loanees also credited the lessons learnt during the initial training and through their interactions with SEDP field officers for making them realise the value of education and for deciding to send their children to school. F15, for instance, told us how humiliated she had been at the SEDP training when it was revealed that she could not sign her own name and had to be taught. She was determined her daughters would be educated as far as she could afford to, despite her husband's objections: *I want my daughters to study a lot, but my husband thinks primary is fine. He thinks girls don't need too much education, educate them a little and marry them off. My own opinion is that with a bit more education, they might be able to get job, we will see what happens. If they go upto matric, they will be able to work, to feed themselves. I don't want my daughters to be like me, uneducated.*

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<sup>4</sup> I found a similar value attached daughters' education as a route to greater self-reliance by women workers in the garment industry who I interviewed in the context of a study exploring the impact of wages on women's empowerment (see Kabeer, 1996).

*...How ashamed I felt that in front of so many people, so many other women and the officers, they found out I couldn't sign my name. My husband shouted at me, why didn't you learn to sign your name before you went to the training. I don't want anyone to humiliate my daughters like that. That is why I would like to educate them, so that they never feel that shame.*

#### **14 Purdah, female mobility and social status: the contradictions of class and gender**

In as much as purdah, and the constraints on women's mobility in the public domain which it entails, is widely recognised as a central factor in their subordinate status within the immediate family as well as in the wider society, women's ability or inability to challenge these constraints and to participate directly in the public sphere of market and community has, as noted earlier, featured prominently in a number of evaluations of the 'empowerment' impact of credit. Particular stress was laid in the negative evaluations on participation in major market transactions since women's inability to participate in such transactions explains their dependence on male intermediaries for the purchase of inputs and, more critically, the marketing of their produce and consequent reduction or loss of control over the proceeds from their labour. In the more positive evaluation by Hashemi et al, however, mobility by women was taken to encompass a number of different domains – the market, health clinics, beyond village boundaries – and they found that by this broader definition of mobility, BRAC lending, but not Grameen, had led to an increase<sup>5</sup>. Clearly the difference in the two sets of findings stems from differences in how the 'mobility' impact was conceptualised and defined.

However, both the factual evidence on women's mobility in my study, as well as the interpretations which they offered in the interviews, suggest that the relationship between female mobility and female autonomy is not a clear-cut one. The reasons for this complexity is that notions of 'purdah' and the 'visibility' of women are closely interwoven with local understandings of class, social status and gender propriety. It takes us back to the point made earlier in the report that gender and class relations are inseparable in the lives of men and women and can impose tradeoffs which are determined by social, rather than economic, considerations. Some women in the qualitative sample had fewer reservations than others

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<sup>5</sup> It may be worth noting here that M11, one of the male loanees I interviewed made a comment on the difference between BRAC and Grameen organisational practices in relation to women loanees which might explain this finding: *The main difference between the two is that Grameen women have to attend their samity meetings, they have to have discussions. BRAC women have to come to the bazaar to collect their seedlings, loans, chickens. They have to come in front of so many men so they have a problem. It is difficult for women to come to the bazaar.*

about moving around in the public sphere but they tended to be either more educated or else much poorer and already accustomed to some degree of public mobility. However, even these women were reluctant to extend their mobility to the *bazaar* or *haat*. Two concepts figured most frequently in discussions about the advantages of observing purdah versus the advantages of increased public mobility: honour and courage. ‘Honour’, and its reverse, ‘shame’, figured most frequently in explanations as to why women were anxious to conform to purdah norms while ‘courage’ was the concept most used by women who described a greater willingness to move about more freely in the public domain.

The fact that many women linked honour with the observance of purdah norms did not prevent them from going into the district headquarters to attend the initial training, and subsequently going to the local SEDP office to repay their monthly installments because they made a distinction between acceptable or necessary forms of public mobility and unacceptable ones. If visits to the SEDP office is considered to be at the acceptable end of a continuum of possible public activities, attending the market place was at the unacceptable end. In that sense, the SEDP experience may have necessitated some forms of public mobility but it had not generally altered pre-existing norms about the *desirability* of female seclusion. Here however it is important to note that the decision to stay within the boundaries of female propriety did not impose the same kind of costs on all women. In fact, among women from better-off households, there was a convergence between the economic logic of earning a livelihood and the social logic of maintaining their honour. Because they were most likely to own homestead land and other facilitating assets, returns to homebased work exceeded the wages they could have earned in any form of employment available to women. Thus, for this group, working at home was, in the words of F34, cited below, was question of ‘honour’ as well as of ‘money’:

*F1: I am a woman, I don't go to the bazaar. I go to the SEDP office but never to the bazar. Never. Even when the children were younger.*

*F20: I am a woman, it is not possible for me to go into the bazaar. Some go, those without husbands.*

*F23: I do all my work within the house, it is not a matter of fear, it is a matter of izzat. Women who can eat by staying within the home are given greater value. Everyone gives value to women who work within the home, people outside, as well as ourselves. Men work outside, and women inside. Otherwise why have men been made, you could have*

*had only women. I will go without food, but I will not go without izzat (main decision-maker).*

*F34: I stay inside, but outside, they know I have got the loans and I have made the biggest profit in the neighbourhood. People respect this. I have never worked for anyone else and you must pray it never happens. Only those in need will work in other people's homes, I am not in need. There is a value to working for oneself. To leave one's own home to work for others, that is not good. In someone else's house, you get only 10/- but when you work for yourself, there is enough to feed yourself and have some left over. It is a matter of honour as well as money. You get a bad name and you don't get enough to eat. My husband has never worked for anyone else either.*

*F20: It is alright moving around within the neighbourhood, but I have no time to go to the bazaar. Anyway, I am a woman, it is not possible for me to go to the bazaar. Some women go, those without husbands. But I have a husband and a son, I don't go. It is a matter of man-shonman (honour). People in the neighbourhood will say, she has a husband, she has a son, how can she go to the bazaar?*

However, women from less well-endowed families did experience a trade-off between adherence to purdah and economic imperatives: to maintain seclusion imposed economic costs while the search for livelihoods outside the boundaries of purdah entailed a social cost. There were some who had opted to pay the economic cost and had restricted their earning activities as far as possible to the boundaries of purdah. They either starved invisibly at home, like F16 quoted below, or opted for badly paid and demeaning work in other people's homes 'where nobody would see'. Access to credit was a godsend for this group because it allowed them to feed themselves and their families within the propriety of the home and without the humiliation associated with menial domestic labour in other people's homes:

*F16: Before I could neither work nor could I eat. Is it not a matter of shame to work in other people's home? It is a matter of man shonman. I could not have worked in people's homes. With credit, I got the possibility of working within the home, within the bounds of honour.*

*F32 Before I used to work in people's houses to eat. I worked all day for the stomach alone, not for money. Isn't it better to work in your own house rather than having to work in some one else's just in order to fill your stomach. You stay at home, you raise*

*ducks and hens, you feed yourself, and you make some profit. Isn't it bad when people say 'she goes to work in people's houses. If I can through my own effort work in my own house, why would I want to work for anyone else..How many people behave well with you if you work for them for money? There is no honour in working for someone else.....*

*F50: We went through very hard times, my husband traded in perishable goods, he had very little working capital. Then I had four children, five in fact, one died but for the six of us, his earnings were not enough. We were not very well off at all, we got by from whatever he made. And I would do a bit of work myself, in houses, in rich houses, they could not manage processing their paddy, I would and help out, nobody would see, I would not have to go outside, not to the chowk, it was all within the threshold. Women from middle class households, they can't go outside. If they can manage, they eat; if they can't, they do without food.*

Finally, there was the example of F25 who had in the past, under the pressure of poverty, sold milk in the market place and worked alongside her husband in the field in order to save hiring in labour. Her access to loans had put their household economy on a much more secure footing but while she valued her new economic self-reliance, her earlier behaviour was now considered inappropriate in relation to their newly acquired status. The pressure of community opinion was evident in her decision to withdraw from the market:

*So many people say to my husband, 'Your wife goes outside the house, she goes to the field, she has gone bad'. But my husband says, 'No we have progressed because of her'. I survive by my own effort, I do not borrow from my neighbours any more, nor do I lend. If people try to make me feel ashamed of my work, I do not feel that shame. What I say is even if I go into the jungle to work, at least I will earn some money. If you have no food in your stomach, no one asks about you, not even your father and mother, they might give you food for one or two days but not for seven days. I will work for myself, I will feed myself, I will carry whatever load I have to. I will labour, I will eat. There is no dishonour in work. But I don't sell milk in the market anymore. My value has gone up from before, I feel ashamed, people say, she has improved so much, how can she still go and do this work?*

However, as always, there were exceptions to this general picture of adherence to some form of purdah by female loanees. There were some women, like those who had been engaged in

itinerant trading (ferrying) in Mymmensingh prior to obtaining loans and who continued this work subsequently. Then there were a number of women, usually female household heads, with 'mitigating' circumstances in that there was no able-bodied male adult in their households to undertake their marketing activities. However, it is a third group of women who actively challenged purdah norms who were the most important from the point of view of this evaluation. These were women who positively valued their increased ability to move with ease in the public sphere, although marketing their produce in the bazaar still remained out of bounds. It was this small group for whom the ability to move around more freely was associated with the acquisition of 'courage' rather than the loss of honour and they attributed their new-found self confidence to their interactions with the SEDP. F4, for instance, had been left by her husband fifteen years ago to bring up her children on her own. She talked about the changes that SEDP had made in her life in terms of her ideas, aspirations and capabilities: *I didn't educate the older boys, I didnt have the idea then. But now I know. I hope the younger girls will study. Now I have the knowledge, the money and the courage. Why? I am older now, I went to Mymmensingh for training, I brought the loan. I have got the courage, the ideas (gyan) and the money. Before I couldnt go anywhere on my own, I hadnt even been on a train. Now I go on the bus, on the train to Dhaka on my own. I go to the religious meetings of the madrassah on my own.*

F50 was cited earlier as an example of a woman from a poor but middle-status household who had suffered considerable economic deprivation in the past because of the constraints imposed by status considerations (and her mother-in-law) on her choice of employment. She was also one of the women whose experiences with SEDP had increased her courage and led her to question prevailing notions of propriety: *By joining these samities, many women have got the courage of men. Women now have the same rights as men. If a man can go and cut earth, go the haat-bazaar, to the towns, why cant women? I can go everywhere now, even to the haat. If my husband is not at home, if he has gone to the market, I will go to the labourers' house to fetch them. If I needed to go to the bazaar and my husband was not at home, I would go. Nor was it only in these more routine activities in which she demonstrated her 'courage'. She also told us how her husband was away when the land registration officials came around a year ago and she had dealt on her own with a dispute which arose over their land:*

*I went myself into the town and did the case and got back the land. I went on my own, my husband was not around, but I told the officials he was not well, that is why they took my case. I did the case in my name, I had to talk a great deal, I did all that. I took witnesses and did the case. Rich people often use this land registration business to bribe officials to write up the deeds in their name, they cheat the poor. My husband was not at home at*

*that time, somebody went and registered our land in their name. The officials would not listen to me. I bought a certificate for 50/- from the hospital saying my husband was sick so I could do the case.*

F45 offered an illuminating account of the process by which she had changed from someone who, at the time of her first loan, had remained largely within the home to someone who acquired the courage to move around on her own: *I decided to buy two cows with my first loan. It was my idea but I needed a man to buy it for me. It was mostly my brains behind the idea, but my husband contributed. But now, if I need to, I go into the town on my own, I go to the office. We have increased our courage and it has broken our shame. Courage breaks down shame. Now women go to the town on their own, before only men went, now if we need to, we go. Why should I sit at home? When it was all new, I used to stay at home. Now if I want a new sari, I will go into town to buy it. We have increased our courage since taking the loan. It has broken our shame, so our boldness has increased. It was never fear so much as shame.*

While women's ability to choose and purchase their own clothes may not appear particularly significant in the context of some of the other larger constraints on their actions<sup>6</sup>, its symbolic value to women themselves can be appreciated when F45's comments are compared to the following comment by M15, a male loanee, who lived in the same area as F45: *My wife has never taken a loan, she helps me out from within the house. As long as I am there, I will not let her borrow. Not everyone is the same. Many women are different. Some women don't want to abide by their husbands' wishes, they want to decide for themselves. Some are willing to abide by their husband's ideas. Some women go to the market themselves, they buy their own clothes. Our women don't go to the market, we buy their clothes for them. If the clothes are nice, they like them and if they are not nice, they still like them.*

Despite these exceptions, it remains the case that the overwhelming majority of the women I talked to did not give a great deal of value to the opportunity to move about in the public domain, particularly if that mobility was bound up with having to earn their living as waged labour in the fields or selling their goods in the market place. Indeed, according to F33, there had been far more women around her village in Faridpur working for wages in the fields. Access to credit had led to a reduction in female labour supply as women like herself withdrew

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<sup>6</sup> F45's comment also draws attention to the distinction women made between marketing which entailed their presence in mainly rural bazaars and haats and shopping which entailed visits to the town shopping centre.

into home-based self-employment. F33 explained why she considered this to be a change for the better:

*Before the loans, women used to work on other people's fields, cutting lentils, rice, wheat. They got 20/- to 30/- takas a day. That is happening less now because so many women are getting loans, they are raising cows, goats, they can work for themselves so why should they work for someone else. If you can work for yourself, look, I am sitting here with you, could I do that if I worked for someone else? They would pay me less then. I would pull up lentils, they would give me 20/- a day, this was four years ago. Before women used to clear the irri blocks, they would stand in the water and get leeches on them. Now they don't. Now, with the loans, they have some peace.*

This analysis in this section highlights the ambiguities associated with using women's increased physical mobility, particularly in relation to the market place, as an indicator of empowerment in the context of rural Bangladesh. On the one hand, as long as women adhere to norms of purdah and do not participate significantly in public life, and particularly in market transactions, they will remain dependent on male household members to undertake such activities on their behalf and to that extent the terms of interdependency within the household will be loaded against them. On the other hand, if definitions of empowerment include the expanded capacity for *making choices*, for taking actions which express own priorities and values, then it has to be recognised that for many women in rural Bangladesh, the expanded ability to make choices will often be exercised to make choices which may not be the 'right' ones in terms of an 'outsider' analysis of gender subordination. The paradox is, that from their point of view, the major reason why so many of them opt for some form of purdah or other as soon as they can afford to do so is both to signal their enhanced social standing within their community and to differentiate themselves from lower -status women *who do not have this choice*.

## **15 Social marginalisation and class-related aspects of impact**

This takes me to a final aspect of the changes which loanees attributed to their enhanced access to credit and which related even more directly to these questions of class, social status and wider relations of dependency within the community which the issue of purdah helps to raise. A focus on the gender impact of credit schemes should not obscure their impact on other aspects of social relations since gender is not the sole, or always the most important, aspect of women's identity and interests. Bangladesh is a deeply class-riven society and class

relations are inextricably intertwined with gender in shaping people's sense of themselves and their place in their community: class and gender inequalities are so intertwined and all-pervasive that they are a part of the air in which people breathe which is why it both difficult, but important, to note that they do not always have the equal significance in people's lives.

If in some loanee accounts, changes in gender relations were a relatively muted aspect of their evaluation, it was often because changes in other forms of social inequalities were deemed more important. An analysis of the responses given by many of the women loanees - as well as by some of the men - points to the importance of some of these class-related impacts of expanded credit facilities on their lives. Indeed, given that significant numbers of women did not experience intra-household relations as necessarily conflictual, the most important changes that they experienced as a result of their loans related to their relationships with other members of their community and to the dependency, exclusion or marginalisation which these might have entailed for women loanees themselves or for other members of their household.

I have already noted how women valued the ability to work on their own home-based enterprises rather than as casual waged labour in the homes of wealthy people or in their fields as one of the positive impacts of access to credit. In addition, many also expressed the release of male household members from the demands of moneylenders or demeaning wage labour relationships as a valued impact of their loans. F27 used her loan to mortgage in cultivable land for her husband to cultivate because, as she pointed out, *How long was he going to give labour on other people's land?* Similarly, F35 said: *My husband used to be daily labourer..Now, by the grace of God, he does not give labor to anyone.* F37 testified that it was not only women who are bound in their work choices by status considerations: *We were in great trouble before, my sons would not work on anyone else's land, they were Talukdars. They might be starving, but they would not work on anyone else's land. Now we have a proper house, 15 kata land .....*

For other women, reliance on moneylenders or wealthy landlords for credit, usually at extortionate rates, had been the most humiliating aspect of their pre-loan experience:

*F14: My husband used to have to labour for someone else, now I have got a fat loan, I have given it to him, he is doing business...he is making money, I am doing business, I am making money. I explained to him, if we can make a profit, we don't have to stretch our hands to the wealthy or pay 500/- to the mahajan for one maund of rice, if we get the loan and labour hard, we don't have to beg from the rich anymore*

*F43: My husband now works alongside me. He no longer has to hear harsh words if he does not pay his debt on time.*

The other example of the positive impact of loan-related prosperity was apparent in the contrast that both male and female loanees made between their previous exclusion from the social life of the community and from the access to resources it embodied with their present ability to participate in community life, to be given respect by others and to be in a position to offer both hospitality and resources:

*F17: We used to have to borrow from others, we had to give 10% interest monthly. Now I give loans to people, I have learnt. I give at the same rate of interest. Of course, people give value to me now. If I dont have decent clothes to wear, oil for my hair, no one gives me a second glance. Now I have oil, I have decent sarees, I have money in hand, everyone will give me value. No one came to visit us before, now they come.*

*F29 Before I had to sit under a tree and sell my goods, people would make comments about me, I could say nothing. Now since the loan, they don't know what to say, they are nervous to say anything. After all, I haven't brought a loan just one, I have brought twice, thrice, four times. Now even if people want to say anything, they dont have the courage. Those who never acknowledged me now invite me, I have money, they might need to borrow. And they looked down on me, never came to my house, I was poor, I could not feed them. And now even in houses where I do not expect to be invited, I am asked.*

*F39 We dont have to stretch out our hands to the wealthy or the moneylenders anymore....If we use the loan and labour hard, we don't have to beg from the rich any more. Apart from learning about enterprises, I found the training useful because I could not have talked to you like this before, now I have become smart in many ways. We have made progress outside the home, inside the home, in our talking, in signatures, in every way. I didnt understand all this before, I didn't have even just the understanding.*

*F37: Have things improved for us? Listen, when you have no money, there is nobody, but when you have money, you suddenly have so many friends and acquaintances. Money is all. All that time, when we had no food, nothing to eat, no one wanted to give*

*us anything. And now, day and night, from house to house, it is 'have a betel leaf, tobacco leaf, cigarettes, chair, chowki....'*

## **16 Conflicts over credit: programme-related differences in impact**

It will be seen that there are many convergences between the positive impacts reported for the SEDP and those discussed earlier for the Grameen, Bank, BRAC and other poverty-oriented credit interventions, suggesting that such impacts can be attributed to access to credit per se rather than to specific models of credit delivery. In a general question as to why so many organisations were giving women preferential treatment in the distribution of credit, most SEDP loanees, men as well as women, generally approved the policy. Both agreed that women were conscientious about loan repayments, gave priority to family needs and deserved to be given loans in their own name. There was however an interesting gender-related divergence in some of the other reasons that men and women gave in relation to the question of loans to women. Men were more likely to give the norms of gender propriety as a rationale: credit allowed women to make their contribution from within the home. While some women also subscribed to this view, there was a much wider spread of opinion among women. Some felt that the government had been recognised that one income was no longer enough; that women also had to eat; that violence against women was reduced if they became more economically productive; that it was the era of women's rights, as evidenced both in the 'women and development' rhetoric espoused by successive governments and in the fact that Bangladesh appeared to be having one woman prime minister after another<sup>7</sup>. Above all, women felt that men were more irresponsible in repaying loans because they had other options/less sense of honour/tendency to fritter away money on risky investments or unproductive consumption.

At the same time, it is important to highlight an important divergence between the impact reported for SEDP and that noted in evaluations of the poverty-oriented credit organisations which appeared to reflect specificities of organisational practice. Some degree of direct comparison was possible because the pervasiveness of these other organisations – particularly Grameen Bank and BRAC - meant that contact with their operations in the course

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<sup>7</sup> F7's reasoning about the relevance of women prime ministers referred to the affinities she felt might exist between women: *Why do women get loans? Because we have a woman's government. Men are not in the government, a woman is, Hasina is. If someone wants to insult or harrass a woman in the village, to dishonour a woman, then if a woman goes to a woman leader, she will get justice. A man will not give justice, he will not understand my pain as a woman. You will understand, but a man will not, will he? If I suffer pain, I will tell you, I cannot tell a man. You will know my shame.*

of the field work was inevitable. In some cases, SEDP loanees themselves had borrowed from one of these organisations, in other cases, a female family member, a wife or daughter, had been the borrower. In any case, almost all the loanees we interviewed knew at least one or more borrowers from these organisations within their neighbourhoods.

As I noted earlier, the apparently unanimous agreement among SEDP female loanees that violence had been reduced as a result of their access to credit was remarkable. Even in the cases where women reported an increase in conflict with their husbands as a result of 'talking back' they did not report an increase in violence. By contrast, evaluations of the poverty-oriented credit programmes reported considerable levels of stress, tension and conflict between women and their husbands, between loanee household members and programme workers and between members of credit groups. This difference was often made explicitly by a number of loanees. A male SEDP loanee whose wife took loans from BRAC gave the following account, which closely resembles the analysis given by Goetz and Sen Gupta:

*Most of the women give their loans to their husbands, whatever the husbands do with it, waste it, use it, whatever, as long as on the day of repayment, they can provide the money on time. By bringing BRAC loans, the beatings men inflict on women, we are seeing this, the various harrassments. Some husbands can give repayment money, some can't. Someone from our neighbourhood, his wife borrowed money, he spent it, later he took his wife and they both disappeared. Perhaps to Dhaka. The people who get loans from BRAC, they have nothing, not even a home of their own. I have heard about this violence from people in my area. Some women manage their households well, they repay on time. But sometimes men will spend all the money in the bazaar and when the woman says, I have to pay 50/- taka installment tomorrow, give me the money, he will say, I don't have it. These are the uneducated samaj (members of society), they use abusive language and say, where shall I get the money from, shall I steal it, I don't have it.....Some husbands force their wives to take loans, they threaten to beat them, they say, you have become a member of the samity, why don't you get a loan. With SEDP, they mainly give to men and I haven't heard of such problems, so I can't say anything about it.*

His wife confirmed some aspects of his description but differed in other aspects of her account. Her main stress was on the joint problems faced by BRAC loanees and their husbands vis-à-vis BRAC officials and she also laid greater stress on the benefits of such loans for women than her husband did:

*BRAC gives women money because they say everyone has to work to eat. They say, you take this loan, you raise poultry, you will increase your standards. Or go into paddy husking. They explain to us, of course, you should let your husband have some of the money as well, but keep some for yourself. Some do business, some can't. Some waste it all, blow it away. Then it is difficult when repayment time comes. Some husbands pull rickshaws, some carts, some cut earth. It is difficult to repay out of this. Our BRAC group has been going 3 years, there were 24 of us, now there are still 12. They are the ones who are giving repayments regularly. Some cannot repay, the officers come again and again. The women have to sell off their utensils, go into debt, the men also. The men also repay, after all, they have taken the money from the women. We know the officers are still chasing a few, they can't find them. When they come, the women are not at home, they have gone elsewhere. But women's value has increased with the loans. Suppose I cannot get by, I bring a loan of 2000/-, I do some business, I can now get by, and I am getting by better. And my husband will give me value because I am bringing a loan.*

F13 also testified to some of the gender conflicts generated by poverty-oriented lending, but attributed it to individual character traits of loanees and their husbands: She also tried to explain why these impacts did not occur with SEDP:

*There are many cases when women are not able to make repayments because husbands are no good. They have wasted the loans rather than using it, but they still have to repay it. There is big trouble between husband and wife then: should they sell the utensils or the roof? There are sometimes beatings, the husband says, I told you not to take the loan, you insisted, now you repay it. BRAC women did not necessarily work before, they began with the loans. But those who do not work at all themselves, who just sit at home and wait for their husbands to earn, they find repayment difficult. The difference from SEDP is that they have brought very small loans, they have not been able to use it profitably or cleverly, so how can they repay every week? With SEDP loans, we do bigger business, earn more money and so our repayments are easier. So there is no conflict. But of course there is always conflict between husband and wife. Suppose today I decide I won't work because I have had a row with my husband, then I realise I am only punishing myself so I go back to work. But with BRAC women, there are rows because of repayments. There were rows before but with the repayments, the rows have increased.*

F14 who had borrowed from a local poverty-oriented NGO before she switched to the SEDP suggested that the conflicts which were engendered by such lending reflected both the

structural disadvantages that women faced as well as individual character traits of men and women involved:

*We village women, whatever money we bring, we cannot do haat-bazaar, we have to hand the money to our husbands. If we want to buy poultry, he has to buy it, if we want paddy, he has to buy it. If he doesn't, if he just gambles it away or goes to see a film or just loses it, he comes home at night and we say, where is the money, what did you do with it, then village men beat their wives, they say, whatever I did with the money, I did, tomorrow I will earn more. Other women's husbands in our group cannot do this because the wives are tough. Husbands who gamble are like this, those who are good, husband and wife together use the loan for business to eat and repay the loan and still have a profit. Where women are soft and the men are tough, the women get a beating if they speak up. Two women who left our group, their husbands were no good. We thought even with this little money, there is so much disturbance, we had better get rid of them. Out of 20 members, 2 had to leave.*

F16's daughter had taken 6 loans from Grameen over 3 years and had not experienced any problems with repayments herself because of her harmonious relationship with her husband. She testified to the problems faced by some of the women in her group but she also estimates that they constituted a tiny and inevitable minority:

*There are problems with repayments, sometimes one member may help another. There are always 2 or 5 everywhere who cannot repay, whose husbands gamble or have some other vice, they do not help their wives out. There were 2 such women in our group of 40. The group leader explained that if they were going to give their loans to their husbands and their husbands misused it, then they should not take loans. I myself have never had any problems with repayment. My husband sometimes works for other people, sometimes he does petty trade, I sell some vegetables, we combine this and repay the loan. I take small loans so I can repay it after having fed my children and my family. I tell my husband to make sure he gives me the money for the repayment so I don't have to go and ask for it from someone else. I say, just as I am your wife, the other women in the group are someone's wife, if she can give the repayment, why can't I? I should not have to go to anyone else and make myself small. If it looks like there is going to be a problem with repayment, then when my husband goes to buy rice for us, we might need 10kg. I tell him to buy 8 kg and give me the other 2 kg for repayments. Some women will save a fistful of rice everyday to cope with times when they are having trouble repaying.*

It will be seen that there was general agreement among SEDP loanees, some of whom had previously borrowed from BRAC and Grameen, that there were greater stresses and strains associated with the latter's lending programme, sometimes taking the form of conflict between husband and wife, other times between loanees' families and field officers, and still other times between 'irresponsible' loanees and other group members. Although loanees' explanations sometimes referred to the individual characters of women loanees or their husbands, this does not suffice to explain why the same character traits were not repeated for SEDP loanees. Instead, their references to some of the programmatic differences between SEDP and poverty-oriented organisations offers a more plausible source of explanation.

First of all, SEDP gave loans to men as well as women so that one potential source of conflict was removed. While on some occasions, its officials did have to consciously encourage women to apply for loans, given that the default option for most families was for male members to apply, on most occasions, the decision was left to the family. Secondly, the women they targeted often had prior entrepreneurial experience and hence much more likely to make use of some of their loans and to experience the positive impacts associated with their improved contribution to the household. Many of the tensions reported in connection with poverty-oriented lending occurred between programme staff and women loanees who were having trouble meeting their weekly repayments because either they or their husbands had failed to use the loan profitably. Thirdly, individual rather than group lending also reduced another source of tension. Many of the tensions reported in negative evaluations of poverty-related lending occurred between group members since the entire group was liable if any member defaulted. SEDP loanees expressed their preference for an organisation which did not require them to attend time-consuming meetings as a condition of accessing loans and which allowed them take individual responsibility for loan repayment<sup>8</sup>. Fourthly, SEDP gave viable sized loans to its members in contrast to the poverty-oriented organisations. As one woman said in relation to Grameen lending: *They only give you 1000 takas, what can you do with that?* The gendered significance of this was that, for women, SEDP loans were large enough to make their own enterprises viable, hence enhancing the value of their own contributions to the household. and still be able to share them with male household members, thereby reducing potential resentment and ensuring joint benefits. As we saw from the study by Schuler et al cited earlier, while access to credit by itself appeared to have some effect in

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<sup>8</sup>Having also carried out research with women workers in the export-oriented garment industry in Dhaka, I find it ironic that women garment workers who are far more likely to perceive their shared interests as workers because of the collective organisation of the labour process, are largely prevented by both employers as well as by the government from collective organisation, while women loanees who are working as individual entrepreneurs, often in direct competition with each other, are required to form groups as a condition of accessing loans.

diminishing violence against women, women's economic contribution appeared to only start to have an effect once it had reached a certain level. The significance of loan size also crops up in the study Goetz and Sen Gupta: they found that while very few women in their sample received loans greater than 4000/-, those that did were much more likely to make some use of their loans themselves. There is another reason why the question of loan size is worth further exploration in the context of lending to women. If it is found that the sizeable profits reported by many of the women loanees in Faridpur reflect their larger investments in enterprises which they managed themselves rather than their investments in male enterprise, then one of the long-standing pieces of received wisdom about the limitations of female entrepreneurship in Bangladesh will have been shown to be yet another example of long-standing prejudice.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, SEDP loans were given on easier terms: subsidised interest rates, monthly repayment and possibility for postponement of repayments in times of trouble. This reduced the stress experienced by its loanees in meeting their repayments and may have contributed to the quality of the relationships within the family that they reported. The discipline built into poverty-related lending, which gave rise to many of the stresses remarked on by the loanees, reflected a concern with loan recovery and with long-term programme sustainability. SEDP, by contrast, appeared to be able to avoid high rates of default because it backed up the field-based loan recovery efforts of its staff with the perceived authority of a government bank. It could therefore afford to run a relatively relaxed operation and it was one of the constant ironies thrown up by the fieldwork that relatively well-off households benefitted from the services of an organisation like SEDP which lent substantial sums of money at subsidized interest rates and with considerable flexibility built into its repayment schedules while around us, poverty-focused credit organisations were lending small fractions of SEDP loans at commercial interest rates and inflexible weekly repayment schedules to some of the poorest sections of the rural population. Indeed, the pressures of meeting weekly repayments was mentioned most frequently by those loanees in my sample who had experience of some of these other organisations as the single most stress-inducing aspect of their practices. As F18 said bitterly of the discipline imposed by Grameen to ensure weekly repayment, *If you take say, 1000/- from Grameen, you have to repay 10/- takas a month or the 30 members of your samity will have to make it up for you. The cashier refuses to get up and says to you, Until you have given your repayment, I will not leave. With SEDP, they allow you to give it 2 months late. In Grameen, your samity members will come and sell whatever is in your house to repay your loan. Grameen says, even if your husband or your son has died, even then you will have to make sure that you have made your repayment.*

The other form of change which was missing from the accounts given by SEDP loanees was the kind of political awareness and political mobilization documented by Hashemi et al. in the context of Grameen Bank and BRAC. This is not surprising since, aside from a brief initial training which covered both social and economic issues, SEDP does not set out to explicitly 'empower' women in the way that some of the other credit programmes do. Most of its practices, including the preliminary training it provides before selecting loan applicants, are geared to enterprise development, with a small component on social awareness built into it. Despite the brevity of the training, many of the SEDP loanees expressed a remarkable degree of enthusiasm about what they had got out of it and indeed, I witnessed a heated discussion between women loanees during a focus group discussion as to which they valued more: the training or the loan. Nevertheless, the difference between the lessons offered by SEDP training and that offered by a local, explicitly feminist development organisation was spelt out by F46 who had experience of both: *Training is good for women. Loans are good, you can do something with the money. Before I joined Saptagram, you could say I was stupid, Saptagram taught me to think for myself. With SEDP training, I also learnt something new, how to do business....*

SEDP thus has limited impact in generating a *politicized* awareness about the deep-seated social inequalities of class and gender and about forms of social action to tackle such inequalities. Women may have been empowered, but it is largely at the individual level. In relation to their interactions as women within the wider arena of gender relations beyond the household, impact remains limited and largely dependent on the courage of individual women. On the other hand, an organisation whose primary goal is enterprise development, and who appears to be doing this very successfully, is not best equipped to promote such structural change and may end up dissipating the impacts it has achieved if it seeks to take on this goal. Such endeavours may be better left to other organisations with a comparative advantage in this field. This suggests a greater need to support organisations which are committed to the advancement of women's rights in Bangladesh and to reverse the current trend to invest primarily in interventions with purely tangible outputs, of which micro-credit programmes are a prime example.

## **17 Conceptualising empowerment: what the findings tell us**

How does an assessment of the empowerment impact of loans to women look when it is analysed from the perspective of the intended beneficiaries rather than from the perspective of

those who share neither their circumstances nor their values? And what sorts of broader lessons can we draw out regarding methodologies for evaluating ‘empowerment’ on the basis of this analysis? The first point that emerges from my analysis is that ‘empowerment’ is a multidimensional process of change and the idea that it can be reduced to any single aspect of process or outcomes carries with it the danger of ignoring other significant and valued changes as well as the variety of routes through which loans to women can translate into positive impacts. Impact has to be judged in relation to the situation prior to the loan, to the kinds of changes made possible as a result of the loan and to the meaning and significance attached to these changes. The central question in any evaluation is therefore whose perspective should count in assessing meanings and significance. The evaluation reported in this paper has relied on women loanees themselves to indicate the kinds of changes they attributed to their access to loans and how they assessed these changes. The overall conclusion reached is that access to loans in their own name has indeed helped to lessen the bleakness of the tradeoffs that many of women have had to make in the past between valued dimensions of their wellbeing. Access to credit has allowed women – as well as men – to meet survival goals and put their livelihoods on a more secure basis without compromising their dignity and sense of self-worth.

The changes reported occurred on a number of different levels. First of all, it occurred at the personal level in the form of a greater sense of self-worth, of economic agency and of their own increased contributions to the household economy. Secondly, it occurred at the level of family relationships, particularly marital relationships, which remain the most central to most women’s lives in the Bangladesh context. While intra-household relationships are characterised by interdependency between its members and a strong logic of co-operation, gender inequalities in the prevailing division of resources, responsibilities, opportunities and constraints have meant that the terms on which co-operation takes place tend to be loaded in men’s favour and women are far more dependent on them – financially as well as socially - than they are on women. Women’s greater increased value within the household economy as a result of their access to loans was largely experienced as an increase in the affection, love and consideration that they received from other family members, particularly their husbands. Tensions and violence within the household which arose out of household scarcity and men’s frustrations at their inability to fulfil their obligations as primary breadwinners were reported as declining as women now took on a greater share of this responsibility.

While these changes all occurred within a framework of household co-operation, and indeed were used to strengthen as well as equalise household relationships, a different pattern of

behaviour was reported by women in exceptionally conflictual marriages. Here women appeared to utilise their loans, not so much to leave their husbands who they continued to need for social protection, but rather to separate from them within the framework of marriage. These women made decisions about loan use independently of their husbands, although generally to the benefit of their children, and they retained control over the proceeds of loan assisted activities. Thus individualised forms of behaviour often signalled greater conflict within the household rather than always signifying greater 'empowerment' for women, as seems to be the assumption in some of the feminist literature. Nevertheless, it was their *independent* access to loans that allowed these women to carve out an autonomous sphere for themselves within their marriages and to that extent allowed them to escape from some of the more humiliating consequences of their marriages.

A final set of changes related to their relationships with the rest of the community. While poor men might enjoy greater access to resources and opportunities within the community than poor women, both were forced into forms of social relationships which were experienced as demeaning and humiliating in order to survive. Both therefore valued their own and each other's opportunity to withdraw from forms of casual, waged labour, which subjected them to the arbitrary authority of others, in order to work for themselves. Both also valued their reduced reliance on usurious moneylenders to tide them over periods of food shortage or through fluctuations in their business cycle. For women, credit also brought the added benefit of the opportunity to work from their own homes and hence withdraw from public forms of labour, including the marketing of their own goods. It was not only lack of self-confidence which kept women out of the market place nor was it necessarily fear of male intimidation. Rather it was the social connotations of women's presence in the market place and what that signified about their own ability to make choices and their men's ability to protect their honour.

Changes at the wider community level were related not merely to how women were positioned in relation to men but also within other class-based relations of dependency, exclusion and marginalisation which affected both women and men. In as much as the wealthier loanees were already integrated into community life, this community-level impact had little significance in their accounts. It was largely the poorer loanees, women as well as men, who described the increase in social interactions as a result of their greater standing within the community, their ability to offer hospitality, to call on help from neighbours when necessary and to offer help when called on. Both women and men also spoke of the impact on their lives of their training experience, of the way it taught them to think about their

enterprises and also how interactions with SEDP field staff helped them to get over long-standing feelings of fear and intimidation in the presence of people from higher status backgrounds than themselves. Here it was exposure to the new sets of social relationships represented by the SEDP, rather than greater integration into a pre-existing community hierarchy, vertical interactions rather than horizontal, that helped them to reposition themselves in relation to those within the community who they would normally have deferred to: local elites, the police and government officials.

A second point is that a qualitative exploration of women's voices on the subject of loan impact benefits from some kind of quantitative indication of the extent of different impacts across a population: were they experienced by all the women, most of the most or only a very small minority of women. Consequently, along with analysing loanees' own assessment of loan impact, the analysis in this evaluation has also drawn on quantitative findings, both from data collected in the course of this study but also those reported in other studies, to try and get a sense of the likely incidence of some of the more measurable impacts across the population and the differences between different types of programmes. The fact that many of the qualitative changes reported by the women in my sample are compatible with, and indeed help to explain, some of the quantitative findings from other studies helps to place the findings on a more firm basis. For instance, my finding that most women loanees reported taking some part in decision-making as result of their access to loans, while the wives of most male loanees appeared not to, provides a qualitative explanation of the statistical finding by Pitt and Khandker that gender of the loanee led to significant differentials in household expenditure and children's schooling.

Many of changes reported by the women and men in my sample are also reported in 'outsider' evaluations of the impact of loans: reduction in domestic violence, increased decision-making and greater choice in household resource allocation. However, there are some aspects highlighted by the women in my sample which do not appear in outsider accounts and there are other aspects which are given a significance in outsider analysis which did not appear to be shared by the women themselves. The stress that women placed on their own sense of enhanced self-worth as economic actors, of being able to make a contribution to household livelihoods, to having a say in their own future and the value they attached to both their own as well as husbands' ability to move out of demeaning forms of waged labour into their own enterprises, all of these are routes to empowerment which are missed out in the evaluations cited earlier. On the other hand, women did not attach quite the same degree of value to individualised forms of control over resources that characterise some of the outsider

evaluations. Although most did seek to utilise some part of their loans themselves, sharing their loans with husbands and sons or joint activities with them did not necessarily carry connotations of loss of control. It was the ability to participate in making decisions about how loans were used and how the income from loans were to be used that mattered and such decisions were valued whether taken jointly or individually. As far as the ability to move around freely outside the home, the picture is mixed. Most women did not see this as a particularly valued aspect of change in their lives and indeed, many put greater emphasis on the advantage of working from the home that their access to credit had made possible. What was near-unanimous was the antipathy to the idea of marketing their own produce in the bazaar or haat because of what it signalled to the rest of the community. Consequently, the idea that women are excluded from the market place and that transportation services and protection against male violence will somehow overcome this constraint misses the point that many women *exclude themselves* from the market and will continue to do so as long as such an activity is associated with poverty and lack of choice.

A third point which emerges out of the analysis in this paper concerns the difficulties of transferring indicators of empowerment from one context to another without due recognition of the specificities of local culture and autonomy. Individualised forms of control over resources, while recognised as an important features of the economic autonomy displayed, for instance, by the women described in the West African literature may not be the goal of most women in Bangladesh. The problem for women in Bangladesh is that while there is considerable interdependency between household members, given the corporate principles along which it is organised, it is a very asymmetrical interdependence, in which men dominate in the distribution of authority and decision-making while women are constructed as highly dependent partners. As long as the family, and male guardianship remains women's greatest source of economic and social security, women's interests are likely to be better served by equalising the terms of interdependence within the family rather than seeking to establish their autonomy. The mitigation of their dependent status within the family so that the perceived 'jointness' of family welfare and interests is more equally shared by other members is one means by which this is achieved. In this context, a number of writers have suggested the notion of 'centrality' as a more appropriate description of women's goals in the context of gender relations in Bangladesh (McCarthy, 1967; White, 1992). This does seem to better capture the processes described by the women loanees of moving from marginalisation within household decision-making and exclusion within the community to positions of greater centrality, inclusion and 'voice'. In the same way, it is important not to automatically assume that women everywhere are overworked so that any addition to their

work responsibilities has to be seen in a negative light. Although many women reported increased work loads as one of the consequences of utilising their loans, the fact that this was a product of their increased ability to contribute to household livelihoods and the consequent mitigation of their dependency status within the household, explained why it was experienced as a valued transformation of the terms on which they worked rather than an intensification of their work burdens.

The non-transferability of indicators or the need to contextualise the analysis of empowerment is also illustrated by considering the relationship between income and wellbeing in women's lives. The use of household income as a measure of well-being in the poverty line literature has been widely criticized for failing to capture non-monetary dimensions of wellbeing. Jodha (1989), for instance, found that declines in income-based poverty line measures in a number of villages in Rajasthan failed to capture the improvements in overall well-being reported by the villagers themselves, which included reduced reliance of the poor on exploitative patron-client relationships for employment and income. Household income as a measure of poverty has also been criticised for ignoring gender and other inequalities within the household. The value that the women loanees in rural Bangladesh appeared to attach to money does not contradict either of these critiques. Women in rural Bangladesh value credit because it gives them access to a resource which have been culturally denied to them and which helps to mitigate the worst aspects of their dependent status. When Jodha talks about changes in dependency relations, he is talking about changes in the kinds of dependency relationships that poor men are most likely to be involved in: clientelist relationships with powerful landlords and moneylenders. The women I interviewed were talking about the kind of dependency involved in what generally constituted their most significant relationship: dependency within marriage. Similarly, my study validates the feminist critique of the adequacy of household income as a measure of household well-being and points out that wellbeing is likely to be experienced very differently by women when they have earned some proportion of the income in question compared to situations where they are largely dependent on income earned by others. Women made a very explicit equation between the money they earned and the love they received because in an increasingly monetized economy, in which they have hitherto been denied access to any cash of their own, money represented purchasing power, prestige and value. They have material values because they live in a material world.

The fourth point to emerge out of the analysis in this paper is that any automatic assumption of a one-to-one relationship between 'empowerment' and women's access to credit has to be

ruled out. One of the problems with unidimensional conceptualisations of empowerment is that they feed into dichotomous models of change: if women are not found to be empowered by that indicator, they must be disempowered. If instead empowerment is seen as an *expansion in the range of potential choices available to women* so that actual outcomes reflect the particular set of choices which the women in question value, it becomes possible to make sense of what appear to be rather contradictory findings in this study. It becomes possible, for instance, to reconcile the finding that many of the women who subscribed most strictly to notions of purdah as a matter of family honour and female propriety were also some of the most successful entrepreneurs in my sample, women who not only managed and made a financial success of their enterprises but also described themselves as the main decision-makers in their households. It also allows us to make sense of women loanees who registered assets purchased with their loans or with their hard-earned incomes in their husband's rather than their own names and yet displayed enormous physical courage and initiative on occasions when this property was under threat<sup>9</sup>. And it also explains why women who struggled hard alongside their husbands, working in the fields and marketing their own goods withdrew from these public forms of activity as soon as their increased prosperity allowed them to and opted instead for self-employment within the confines of their homes.

A fifth and final point, which relates to the preceding one, is one that feminist scholars have frequently made: women are not a homogenous category. This point is generally made to highlight the relevance of class, caste, race and culture in differentiating women's needs and interests but I want to make it here in relation to women as individuals and to point out that there is no reason to expect women, even those from the same class, to respond identically to new opportunities. It is important to maintain the analytical distinction between women as a socially subordinate *category* and women as a highly diverse group of *individuals* and to recognise that how individual women experience and act on their access to new opportunities will reflect some combination of their structural positioning and their own unique personal histories. On the one hand, this means that even the best planned intervention is unlikely to be automatically empowering for all women. At best, it can create the kind of environment or

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<sup>4</sup> F13, for instance, was one of the women who had registered the rickshaw purchased with her loan in her husband's name and refused to let him write his land over into her name despite his desire to do so. Yet she, together with another woman, had sat guard, with hatchets in their hands, over this land all night for several nights while her husband was away because she feared that their newly planted rice might be run over by a tractor by another family which was disputing their claim to the land. She told us, *My husband wanted to register the land in my name but I said, it is your father's property, what will people say. But he said, you have struggled so hard for it. I said, it is enough for me that you want to register it in my name but as long as I have a husband, the land will be there and if I don't have a husband, what use is the land to me?*

provide the kind of resources which are most likely to help as many women as possible to empower themselves. But there are always likely to be some women who will not, or are not permitted to, take up the the possibilities on offer. Examples of such women cropped in my evaluation as well as in some of the others discussed in this paper but the weight of the evidence suggests that they are in the minority.

On the other hand, however, the individuality of women also means that not all evidence of empowered behaviour on their part can be ascribed to the intervention in question. The tendency to do this rests on an implicit model of gender relations which assumes that prior to the intervention in question, all women were passive, cowed, fearful and mute. Yet interviews with both men and women in my sample made it abundantly clear not all women had been passive or silent actors within their households prior to the arrival of SEDP. Indeed I have provided examples of many who were already exercising considerable entrepreneurial initiative and playing key roles in managing their households Some of this can be traced to their recognised managerial competence relative to male household members. In addition, it needs to be recognised that the last few decades have seen major social changes in Bangladesh, effecting what has been called a ‘quiet revolution’ (Chen, 1985) in gender relations and in the level of awareness about gender issues. Women’s increased access to credit is both one effect of this revolution in ideas and has also helped to contribute to it. Testimony to these social changes, sometimes making explicit links with the presence of NGOs, appeared in a number of male as well as female loanee accounts,

*M9: A few women in our area have taken loans from Grameen and BRAC. They raise poultry, small business, petty trade. Their husbands go to the haat. Suppose the woman takes 2000/-, she gives it to her husband, he does business with it, she can work from home, they give the repayments properly...men give the women the repayments properly. Things have changed now. Before women were not held in any esteem, but that has changed. Partly people are becoming educated. Also society has changed. People held women in low esteem, they treated them badly. The age has changed. If husband and wife do not co-operate and there is no trust between them, they will not prosper. Suppose today I don't have the money to buy vegetables so I can only afford to buy rice, if there is no trust and communication between us, how will my wife accept this? Now men help women out, women help men out, that is why things have improved. I will educate all my children, I don't want them in the same darkness that I am in.*

F18: *We village girls, we understood less before, we never went into the town or city. Before this area was idle, there was very little education. It was jungle here, there was no decent road. But when the CNB road came, people became smarter. Before you could not sell a marrow here for 2 or 3 takas. Now since the road, you wont get less than 20 or 25 takas. This is how we have prospered....I want both my son and daughter to study till IA. I hope she can get a job in family planning....Many girls even in the villages are working now, they become cashiers with samities, they get paid. Before women did not go out of the house because people might say something. Before we were idle, now if there is money to be made, we are no longer idle....Since independence women in towns got more opportunities, but since the first woman prime minister, women in the countryside are also getting more opportunities. Men are giving women more value than they used to.*

F46: *I used to be a member of Saptagram, they sent us for training, it gave us courage. Yes, of course, we had some courage before but village society was very different then, you had to move within religious constraint. Women had to stay within the home, purdah was stronger then. But it has changed. Then we were frightened that such and such mollavi (fervently religious) person would get angry with us. Now that fear has gone, but it has taken 20 years.*

Consequently, high levels of participation in decision-making and strong sense of economic agency noted among many women loanees cannot always be automatically or solely attributed to their newly acquired access to credit but has to be seen as facilitated by, and an aspect of, these wider social changes. What credit organisations have done is allowed the many women who have the talent and capacity to manage enterprise to utilise that talent in way that society had not permitted them to do before. The specific ways in which credit delivery is organised will clearly determine the extent to which the most positive impacts are likely to be experienced. The practical lessons which emerge from my comparison of the impacts reported by SEDP loanees and those reported for other poverty-oriented credit organisations highlight the importance of giving women adequate sized loans and some degree of flexibility in repayment but also suggest that unless some attention is paid to the collective aspects of women's subordination, women's empowerment will remain at the level of individuals.

## **18. Efficiency, equity, poverty and welfare: some other rationales for lending to women**

By way of conclusion, I want to problematise the question of 'empowerment' as a criteria for determining the desirability of a development intervention. Empowerment is recognised as a highly contested concept, one which is likely to vary across class, time and space. Moreover, as this study has demonstrated, impacts which are deemed 'empowering' by structuralist or feminist analysts of power relations, by donor agencies or by non-governmental organisations may not necessarily be those most valued by women themselves. If the empowerment impact of an intervention is evaluated without consultation with those who it is meant to 'empower', there is a very real danger that the evaluation ends up as yet another mechanism through which the needs, priorities and values of those who are already rendered silenced within their communities are suppressed once again by outside agencies which purport to represent their interests.

I have also pointed out that it was not always credit per se which explained the self-confidence and competence of many of the women I interviewed, that they had been self-confident and competent long before their access to SEDP lending. However, this should not undermine the importance of ensuring women access to credit. While concern with the 'empowerment' potential of interventions is a valid criteria for judging their impact, there are also other important rationales for lending to women. The fact that women are much more likely to share their loans with male household members than men are with women, in my view, merely strengthens the argument for lending to women: the entire family is much more likely to benefit economically, and women are much more likely to benefit socially, when loans are directed at women rather than men. Loans to men do little to challenge the internal gender inequalities of households, and indeed appear to reinforce them by giving men an affordable base from which to prevent their wives from taking their loans or engaging in new forms of economic activity. Furthermore, loans to men do little to enhance women's productivity since they are less likely to be shared with women.

This is not an argument for excluding men; as I have pointed out, this carries its own set of problems. But it does mean that the rationale for lending to women should not hinge solely on the 'empowerment' potential of such loans but should be firmly grounded in an analysis of the full range of economic, social and political benefits of different lending strategies. It is one of the injustices of the way that society is organised in Bangladesh that extremely able women, even those from better-off households, are unable to realise their entrepreneurial potential because their gender acts as a barrier to gaining access to the necessary resources. Men, even poorer men, have always had more choices in terms of accessing economic opportunities, including credit, than women. Women's higher repayment records do not

merely reflect their socialised compliance in the face of the instrumentalist authority of NGO or government officials, as has been suggested in the more negative evaluations, but also the compliance which comes with having few choices. If purposive interventions can help to direct resources to women, thereby overcoming past barriers which have led to the suppression of their entrepreneurial potential, then they must be welcomed on grounds of efficiency and equity.