

# THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN BANGLADESH: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

Empowerment is a popular buzzword and its meaning has evolved over time. As a concept, empowerment refers to the process of transferring power or authority to individuals, allowing them to make decisions and take control of their lives. When it comes to women's empowerment, the meaning varies by country, but it may encompass financial autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence, and self-worth, among other aspects. To fully understand how 'women's empowerment' evolved and shifted over the decades in Bangladesh, it is necessary to evaluate the historical trajectory of women's empowerment since independence. This article critically examines earlier trends and recent interventions on women's empowerment in Bangladesh by various stakeholders, including the government (GO) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), from a feminist perspective. By conducting a desk review of the national discourse on women's empowerment, the study concludes that, despite decades of interventions aimed at empowering women, there has been an overemphasis on boosting women's financial inclusion rather than promoting women's agency in their everyday lives. From a feminist standpoint, the study argues that, while financial inclusion for women is a prerequisite for empowerment, establishing women's agency by allowing them to exercise their choices and decisions takes greater attention, which has long been disregarded in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Women's Empowerment, National Discourse, Feminist Standpoint, Power, Agency, Personal Lives

## Introduction

Empowerment is a popular buzzword with various meanings, including financial autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence, and self-worth, among others. According to Narayan-Parker, a former World Bank Senior Advisor, the meaning of empowerment differs depending on how it is measured in different

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nations (Narayan-Parker, ed., 2005). Empowerment, as a concept, has been used in a variety of ways, and it is seen to occur at several levels, across a range of dimensions, and through different processes. The term initially appeared in Paulo Freire's book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," which had a significant impact on our theoretical understanding of it (Calvès, 2009). It was first used to identify grassroots attempts to examine and modify unequal and unjust power structures, but the concept has now extended globally, allowing development practitioners and feminist researchers to interpret it in several ways (Rowlands, 1997).

The term 'empowerment' became popular among feminists in the mid-1980s. Feminist organisations campaigning for equality for marginalised groups contributed to developing new frameworks for assessing women's empowerment. Beginning as a radical movement in the 1980s, the conceptualisation of empowerment has since matured into a mainstream development concern. Because economic growth and women's empowerment are inextricably connected, the development paradigm has significantly emphasised reducing gender disparities and promoting equality to achieve women's empowerment. As a result, throughout the last few decades, development practitioners emphasised women's better access to health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation as critical components of empowerment.

Although there have been numerous instrumental improvements in the development discourse to achieve women's empowerment, Cornwall (2016) observes that development narratives are primarily concerned with what women can offer to development rather than what development can provide for women. While economic progress and women's development may go hand in hand, feminists argue that understanding how women benefit from this process in terms of making agentic choices and decisions is a necessary prerequisite for achieving empowerment.

According to Kabeer (1999), the basic concept of empowerment is power, which feminists consider as a starting point for determining how the concept of empowerment should be used. One way to think about power is through the ability to make decisions (Kabeer, 1999). The concept of empowerment is thus intrinsically tied to disempowerment, and it refers to the procedures by which persons who have previously been denied the ability to make decisions regain that ability. Cornwall (2016) argues that feminist perspectives developed in response to women's individual or collective experiences in a specific social context are frequently overlooked or underestimated in the development discourse of

empowerment. Inspired by global feminists, this study delves critically into Bangladesh's development initiatives for women's empowerment since independence. It investigates whether these approaches successfully transferred economic growth and income-generating capabilities into 'power' and 'agency' in women's personal lives.

The concept of agency is not new; since the 1970s, social science experts worldwide have been researching it. On the one hand, agency has typically been associated with an individual's ability to pursue and attain whatever goals or ideals they consider important (Sen, 1985). Agency, on the other hand, refers to the power dynamics inside institutions (such as families, the legal system, and the media) that impact an individual's actions and choices. Like, social scientists, feminist scholars studied 'agency' to find out how women use cultural norms to challenge patriarchal systems and achieve their goals. According to Kabeer (2008), the agency helps women confront and overcome discriminatory attitudes that keep them in disadvantaged situations. The concept of power is therefore critical in assessing women's agency since it challenges the view that empowerment is primarily dependent on women's employment and financial earnings. Here, the term 'power' relates to how women can exercise their freedom of choice.

Some researchers feel that indicators used to investigate the relationship between agency and empowerment should include choices that contradict or challenge established gender norms and other constraints (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). They also assessed agency by considering other areas of women's lives in developing countries, such as household decisions, economic policies, and involvement in collective decision-making bodies, including reproductive health and rights. Parker and Dales (2017) argue that while studying women's empowerment in Asian countries, it is critical to consider women's agency. In addition to quantifying women's financial inclusion and economic independence, it is necessary to consider non-economic aspects such as women's changing labour patterns, mobility, and social and economic developments, among other things (Parker & Dales, 2017). This will allow us to better understand how women gain access to, discuss, and experience the implications of exercising agency in everyday situations such as marriage, work, singlehood, pregnancy, and changes in intimate relationships.

This study investigates the relationship between agency and empowerment, with a particular emphasis on Bangladesh's national discourse on women's empowerment. It examines whether this discourse has empowered women to make their own choices and decisions in their everyday lives. Using Rowlands' (1997)

and Kabeer's (1999) feminist interpretations of power and agency, the study examines the representation of women's empowerment in Bangladesh over time using a "double continuum" model. This critical analysis seeks to understand how national discourses on empowerment have influenced women's ability to exert agency at the individual level.

The paper is divided into six sections. The second section explains the methodology of this study. Section three discusses the contrasts in how development practitioners and feminists define women's empowerment. Following the differences in how development practitioners and feminists define women's empowerment, I move on to section four, which examines the national discourse of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. In section five, I challenge the trajectory of women's empowerment in Bangladesh and analyse how the question of women's 'self', and their agency was disregarded by bringing the 'double continuum' model.

## **Methodology**

To explore the historical trajectory of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, I conducted a desk review. A desk review is a secondary data collection method, sometimes known as the 'De Jure' method, that examines content based on the current literature available in papers. The desk research method involves acquiring and analysing data from secondary sources, including documents, reports, academic publications, and Internet/library resources. The primary objective of a desk review is to find relevant data sources, evaluate data quality, and identify gaps that require future investigation.

The desk review method entails gathering information from several sources and presenting it in a format easily conveyed, shared and acted upon. There are two parts to a desk review report. The first is data collation, which entails a desk-based assessment of all published documents, and the second is the availability of appropriate resources for the site. Desk review uses empirical literature reviews and theoretical approaches to analyse, synthesise, and compare previously collected data. While desk review research may include inference methods to reach findings, the usual approach no longer includes concluding order to address research problems, validate hypotheses, and achieve objectives (Topolewski, et al., 2023).

This study employs a desk review method to investigate the context, goal, and focus of empowerment interventions from multiple actors, including the government (GO), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and women's rights

organisations. This method also helped me analyse empowerment programs at the policy level, such as the Financial Year Plans (FYPs) developed by the government and implemented by GOs and NGOs across decades. The study conducted a desk review to find contrasts between development discourses of empowerment that emphasise economic growth and the feminist perspective on empowerment, which prioritises women's agency in their personal lives.

Before delving into development interventions on women's empowerment in Bangladesh, I will examine how the concept of women's empowerment has been defined and perceived by the development discourse and feminist interpretations at the global level. This debate will help readers understand why it is important to evaluate women's empowerment from a feminist viewpoint. It will also examine the historical context of women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

The following section highlights how empowerment has been defined globally, from a development and feminist standpoint.

### **Understanding the Global Pathways of Women's Empowerment**

In terms of the definition of women's empowerment across the world, the development discourse and feminist interpretations have differed. This section begins with an examination of the many viewpoints on global pathways to women's empowerment offered by development practitioners and feminist scholars. First, I examine the key features of empowerment in development discourse, as well as its deficiencies in addressing the problem of choice and abilities in empowering women to exercise agency. Then, drawing on feminist conceptions of empowerment, particularly those of Rowlands (1997) and Kabeer (1999, 2001), I emphasise the importance of conceptualising women's empowerment in terms of their economic resources, agency, and achievements. The discussion in this section will assist in reflecting on the local conceptualisation of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, which will be discussed in the fourth section of this paper.

### ***The Global Development Discourse of Women's Empowerment***

Empowerment, according to researchers, implies different things to different people around the world because it is inadequately conceptualised and loosely defined (Vithanagama, 2016). The continuous debates and discussions within global empowerment research have also reaffirmed numerous meanings, values, and goals associated with its multidisciplinary nature.

Empowerment is usually defined in development discourse as the result of gender-sensitive programs designed to address women's relative lack of power in comparison to men within a certain group, culture, or country (Nussbaum, 2001; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Another definition of 'empowerment' is the process by which women achieve autonomy and self-determination, which may not be sufficient to challenge patriarchal norms and institutions (Chopra & Muller, 2016). Regardless of the goals, intentions, or outcomes, women's empowerment is viewed as a sign of progress toward development.

Gender equality assessment in development discourse has primarily centred on empowerment approaches and initiatives, such as boosting women's participation in income-generating activities and employment. For instance, the United Nations Development Program's Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) and Gender Development Index (GDI) were used to rank countries based on their absolute level of human development and relative gender equality scores (Dijkstra & Hanmer, 2000). While systematic gender equality evaluation has a well-established track record in development discourse, Beteta (2006) presented a compelling argument against it. She criticised GEM as an insufficient and skewed indicator of women's empowerment pointing out that it fails to account for non-economic aspects of household decision-making authority and control over women's bodies. Fraser (2012, p.10) referred to such institutionalised measures of socio-economic gender inequity as a new romance of female advancement and gender equity.

Cornwall and Rivas (2015) voiced concern about the prevalence of compromise in the fight for gender equality and justice, particularly in the development sector's rhetoric about gender equality and women's empowerment. Chopra and Muller (2016) also questioned the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), primarily focusing on economic growth from 2015 to 2030. While Goal 5 encourages gender equality and women's empowerment, Deepta and Müller (2016) raised concern that the SDGs fail to address structural inequality in areas such as women's reproductive and sexual health and rights. While these indicators took into account absolute income, education, and health, they did not address gender inequality at the structural level. Because these indicators failed to identify systemic remedies to gender inequality, feminist scholars questioned the approach that was used to track and measure women's empowerment across countries (Cueva Beteta, 2006).

Feminists around the world have, therefore, criticised development practitioners and policymakers for frequently prioritising women's empowerment as a means of eradicating poverty and assuring economic progress. While the development discourse on empowerment is important, feminists feel it is also crucial to understand the question of power and agency, which ensures women's empowerment from within.

The following section discusses feminist perspectives on women's empowerment.

### **The Global Feminist Standpoint on Women's Empowerment**

While considering notions of empowerment from a development standpoint, feminists have criticised the concept and provided their own definitions (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; Vithanagama, 2016). Rather than focusing on financial success and collective power, feminist researchers have shifted their focus to power dynamics, agentic choices, and personal decisions. They viewed empowerment as an ongoing process in which women gained power and opposed patriarchal systems and structures (Nazneen et al., 2014; Kabeer, 2001). Although feminists have always viewed power as a zero-sum game, they continue to consider it an essential factor when reflecting on the ambiguities surrounding the concept of empowerment (Vithanagama, 2016; Rowlands, 1997). Feminist thoughts on power led to a paradigm shift in defining empowerment. My search for a meaningful, feminist definition of women's empowerment began with Rowlands (1997), who was the first to define empowerment in terms of power dimensions. Later, I expanded to Kabeer (2001), who demonstrated the multiple meanings of power in women's personal lives, which I will discuss in depth below.

Rowlands' analysis of power broadened the concept of empowerment by introducing terms like 'power to' and 'power over'. The phrase 'power to' alludes to "power's productive or generative potential, as well as the new possibilities or actions that can be created without dominant relationships" (Mathie, et al., 2017, p.57). In contrast, the concept of 'power over' elicits a wide range of negative images in people's minds, including repression, wealth, force, compulsion, prejudice, corruption, and abuse. Rowlands (1997) addressed three components of power - personal, relational, and collective, not simply to improve women's lives but also to influence fundamental structural changes in gender relations. The 'personal' dimension of empowerment emphasises self-esteem, independence, and dignity, while the 'relational' aspect focuses on close relationships. In contrast, the 'collective' dimension focuses on the development of confidence, agency, and self-management through group activities.

Rowlands' (1997) theory of power influenced other feminist researchers and development organisations to widen their perspectives on empowerment. For example, in response to Rowlands' work, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which was primarily concerned with women's economic development, implemented a human development-based economic policy in the early 2000s. UNIFEM's definition of women's empowerment now includes gaining knowledge and understanding of gender relations, as well as developing a sense of self-worth, the ability to control one's own life, and the ability to generate choices and bargaining power to organise and influence the direction of social change (Elson, 2000).

In addition to Rowlands' concept of power, Kabeer (1999) introduced a new dimension of power as 'power from within'. 'Power from within' refers to an 'awakening sense of self' and women's ability to value their uniqueness while appreciating others. According to Kabeer (1999), empowerment is a process that allows the powerless to regain control of their lives and achieve their goals. Kabeer (2017) also shows how the change process offers women a 'power from within' that grows to include a 'power to choose'. Kabeer (1999) defines women's ability to choose in terms of three interconnected dimensions: resources (preconditions), agency (process), and outcomes. The term 'resources' refers to the economic and social capital gained through social contacts across society's multiple institutional domains (such as family, market, and community) (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). In addition, agency relates to women's authority, abilities, and decisions. And, achievement results from the interaction of resources, individual abilities, and decisions.

From a global perspective, there is a considerable difference between how empowerment has been defined and created in development discourse and how feminists have contested and proposed alternative interpretations. In the following section, I will critically explore development projects for women's empowerment in Bangladesh from a feminist perspective, analysing if they take into account women's power and agency at the individual level.

### **The National Discourse on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh**

This section examines historical trends and divergences in women's empowerment in Bangladesh. To evaluate the progress of women's empowerment and the associated challenges and advantages, I consider the initiatives involving government (GO), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have intervened in this domain in Bangladesh.



In Bangladesh, the political mandate of the constitution to rebuild the war-torn country into a just and equitable society has encouraged efforts to advance women's rights. The constitutional principle of equality and liberty, adopted in 1972, ensures the state's steadfast commitment to basic security and rights for all citizens, regardless of gender, religion, or other social distinctions (Huq, 1973). Articles 27, 28, 29, and 65 (3) of the Constitution promote equality and liberty by making it illegal to discriminate against citizens based on religion, race, caste, sexual orientation, or place of birth. This commitment has resulted in extensive state action to empower women, who account for roughly half of the population (Azim & Siddiqui, 2009). Through these actions, the government aimed to achieve two objectives which were economic growth and poverty reduction (Robinson, 2007). For example, the country adopted the National Policy for the Advancement of Women in 1997, following Five-Year Plans (FYPs) since 1973, and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), all of which prioritised women's employment and economic prospects. In this section, I examine how the vision of women's economic growth and equality evolved through state efforts such as FYPs, PRSPs, and national action plans in Bangladesh.

The **Five-Year Plans (FYPs)** marked the beginning of the state's commitment to women's development. The first FYP (1973-1978) focused on women's welfare issues (Guhathakurta 2004). Furthermore, state initiatives targeted women to achieve two objectives: economic growth and population control (Robinson, 2007). Das (2008) identified two programs, Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD), which aimed to improve women's financial standing through income-generating activities during the FYPs.

During the Two-Year Interim Plan (1978-1980), the state switched its development approach from welfare to efficiency. World Bank (2008). During the Second World Conference in 1985, the efficiency approach achieved global success by identifying women's potential as financial credit and resource users. During the second FYP, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) was established to manage a separate budget for women. Considering the agriculture-based rural economy, MWA addressed rural women's economic self-reliance during the Second FYP (1980-85) (Guhathakurta, 2004).

Between 1985 and 1990, the Planning Commission developed the Third FYP, which emphasised the contributions of GOs and NGOs to promoting women's equality. During this time, the government approved international treaties and attended United Nations World Conferences on Women, which helped to integrate

newly recognised international human rights into national discourse (Nazneen et al., 2011). For example, during this period, the Planning Commission prioritised the abolition of trafficking, acid-throwing, rape, and other forms of violence against women (VAW). Bangladesh also followed global development ideas, establishing a Gender and Development (GAD) approach to support women's long-term development.

Between 1990 and 1995, the Fourth FYP laid the groundwork for women's empowerment. Bangladesh attended the 1995 International Women's Conference in Beijing during this time. This resulted in the execution of a National Plan of Action (NPA) that included sectoral ministries and women's rights activists. The creation of the Inter-Ministerial Task Force prompted ministries to focus on empowering women. During this FYP, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) was renamed the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) to evaluate development programs that empower women. The FYP recognised insufficient capacity-building measures and institutional hurdles to achieving equity in all sectors. The major purpose was to mainstream gender, particularly involving poor women in development initiatives. This development strategy was in line with the MDGs. As a result, a Three-Year Rolling Plan (1995-97) was set up with the fourth FYP to increase women's empowerment through capacity-building activities, particularly in rural areas.

The Fifth FYP (1997-2002) sought to advance women's development by integrating gender concerns into education, health, and labour force participation. Gender mainstreaming activities resulted in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which established gender integration as a strategic plan for development operations throughout the last decade.

Besides FYPs, Bangladesh unveiled its National Policy in 2004, focusing initially on economic growth, poverty alleviation, and social development. This approach was motivated by the IMF and World Bank's PRSP for developing nations (Kamruzzaman, 2009). The PRSP framework demonstrated a qualitative shift in improving the situation of the poor and marginalised women, as well as recognising women's rights as human rights, eliminating poverty, and supporting sustainable development (Kamruzzaman, 2009).

Despite hopeful steps toward gender equality, the National Policy was criticised for the government's restrictive attitudes toward women's rights. The **National Policy for the Advancement on Women** had word changes that the women's rights

organisation considered were detrimental to furthering gender equality. For example, the previously mentioned Article 7 (series 2) stated: "Ensure women's equal rights in formulating and implementing economic policies (commercial policy, monetary policy, and fiscal policy, among others)". Later, this was changed to "ensure women's constitutional rights in formulating and implementing economic policies" (World Bank 2008). The policy also removed the phrase "women's equal access to inheritance, property" from Section 7.2 of the 1997 policy (World Bank, 2008).

Women's issues were addressed in the national plan during the sixth and seventh FYPs (2011-15 and 2016-20, respectively). Ratifying the National Women's Development Policy (NWDP) in 2011 was a significant step forward in the country's attempts to develop a society where men and women have equal opportunities and access to all basic rights. Despite the promise of qualitative improvements in women's lives, significant gains in women's decision-making power and ability to make agentic choices in their own lives were questioned.

While major efforts have been undertaken in recent decades to promote women's status, the overall analysis shows that the emphasis has been predominantly on women's economic self-sufficiency. The FYP, PRSP, and National Action Plans all showed how the country's economic growth and poverty reduction goals influenced these initiatives considerably. Furthermore, these projects targeted poor women from rural and marginalised areas to alleviate poverty and produce resources for the country's economic growth, in which women's empowerment and their exercise of choices and decisions in their personal lives did not receive adequate attention.

Besides the government, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also played a significant role in empowering women. In Bangladesh, NGOs were the first to recognise women as economic agents in the public sector (Hossain, 2017). The rise of NGOs fuelled a remarkable transformation for women during the post-liberation period through social mobilisation (Nazneen & Sultan, 2012). Their collaboration with the government was critical in gaining global recognition for women's participation in international migrant labour, paid work in the garment industry, and access to microcredit, education, health, and social security programs (Kabeer et al., 2011). Following the implementation of the population control program in the 1980s, NGOs helped to reduce maternal mortality and improve women's health by giving contraceptives to women (Robinson, 2007). Furthermore, the NGOs successfully implemented nationwide mandatory elementary schooling to enhance girls' education and develop the Female Stipend Policy.

Although NGOs attempted to empower women through economic engagement and access to microcredit, they have been primarily concerned with household welfare (Nazneen, 2007). As a result, women's economic success has been lauded more for accelerating national growth and reviving the war-torn economy than for providing women with the choices and ability to exert agency in their personal lives, such as family and marriage.

The late 1990s saw a shift in NGO campaigns addressing women's vulnerability to various forms of abuse, as well as the establishment of victim recovery centres (Nazneen and Sultan, 2012). Many NGOs discontinued social action efforts in the late 1990s due to the state's apolitical position, and there has been little progress in transforming attitudes about women within families, as anticipated. This decision was motivated by a fear of being labelled as having a 'Western' or 'anti-Islamist' agenda (Azim 2005). As a result, attempts to empower women and address systemic change have stalled.

Among these NGOs, some considered promoting women's rights their key mandate and worked as a catalyst in conceptualising women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Throughout their work, the emphasis on women's development gained popularity and several new terminologies emerged among women's rights activists to imply women's empowerment for example, women's development (*nari unnayan*), 'women's emancipation (*nari jagoron*)', or 'women's liberation (*nari mukti*)' and 'women's rights (*nari odhikar*)' (Nazneen et al., 2011). NGOs with their women's rights mandates worked on a larger scale to empower rural, marginalised women and to transform the lives of women. Their assistance in obtaining international funds for Women in Development (WID) initiatives expanded the reach of the women's movement and boosted its negotiation with the government (Nazneen, 2017). Along with raising public awareness about economic equality and political participation, women's rights activists brought non-economic issues to the forefront, including gender-based violence, sexual harassment, rape, and acid attacks on women (Nazneen & Sultan, 2012).

The historical traits associated with women's empowerment initiatives in Bangladesh implemented by the government and non-governmental organisations demonstrate that women's economic success and access to new markets have improved in recent decades. While these programs were beneficial in terms of overall women's empowerment, the approaches used in translating women's financial earnings into agentic choices and decision-making in their everyday lives were not without flaws. In the following section, I will discuss how traditional

approaches to women's empowerment failed to recognise or overlooked women's agency while pushing for empowerment.

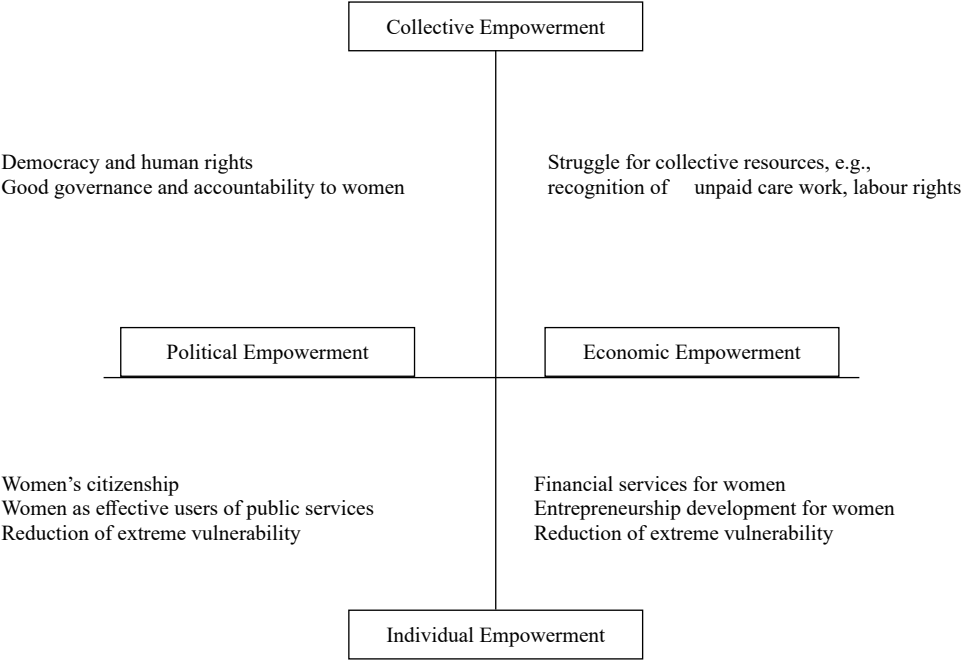
### **Did Women Truly Achieve Empowerment? An Analysis from a Feminist Stance**

The overall assessment of Bangladesh's national discourse on women's empowerment indicates that empowering women through financial inclusion in the national economy has taken precedence throughout the decades. While GO-NGO collaboration on women's empowerment has led to increased economic success and access to new markets for women, they have also received criticism from feminists worldwide. Because income alone does not always explain women's empowerment (Kabeer, 2008; Chopra and Müller, 2016), several feminist scholars have criticised empowerment initiatives that have neglected to address power dynamics inside societal structures. For example, Kabeer (et al., 2011) criticised patriarchal institutions for utilising existing standards to oppress rather than empower women. According to Hossain (2018), the women's empowerment interventions in Bangladesh appeared to be more significant for the country's long-term economic growth and prosperity than demonstrating a commitment to defending women's rights at the individual level.

From a feminist standpoint, we may examine the national discourse on women's empowerment in Bangladesh using Nazneen's (et al., 2011) 'double continuum' model. This model focuses on two key aspects of empowerment such as political and economic empowerment both at collective and individual level. At the collective level, political empowerment includes women's engagement in democracy, human rights, and good governance. Economic empowerment emphasises women's inclusion in recognising unpaid care work and labour rights.

The emphasis on women's collective empowerment through participation in the national economy has spurred debate among feminist researchers about how to approach women's empowerment at individual level. For example, Zafrullah and Nawaz's (2019) work in Bangladesh demonstrates that women have made consistent progress toward empowerment as their labour participation has expanded in the 1990s, particularly in the ready-made garment manufacturing (RMG) industry. Although the expanding microfinance industry has enabled an increasing number of women to start productive small-scale businesses in rural areas, due to socio-cultural constraints and overt conservatism, many entrepreneurial women and those in formal employment continued to face discrimination, harassment,

and unpleasant working conditions, and are unable to make their own choices and decisions in their private lives.



**Figure 1: Double Continuum Model of Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh**  
(Source: Nazneen *et al.*, 2011)

The other end of the continuum displays women's individual empowerment while also accounting for their economic and political power. Individual political empowerment focuses on women's citizenship rights and the effective utilisation of public services. Economic empowerment prioritises financial services for women, entrepreneurship, and the reduction of extreme vulnerability. This continuum shows a clear gap in recognising and emphasising the absence of support for women's 'individual' empowerment and promoting their exercise of agency. It also illustrates the inadequacy of measures to restore women's empowerment over social and personal connections, leisure, personal care, enjoyment, and intimacy (Nazneen *et al.*, 2011).

Kabeer (2017) discovered in a longitudinal study of Pathways that, while changes in women's work improved their subordinate situations over time, their decision-making options and rights remained uncertain. The study, which looked

at women's purchasing habits, outside-the-home mobility, and levels of political participation (such as voting), found that women have the right to make their choices and decisions at the individual, family, and societal levels. However, when it comes to choosing personal decisions for women, such as marriage, partnership, reproductive responsibility, or even child care, women are not encouraged to exercise their agency.

The discussion highlights that empowerment generally involves women's self-actualisation, improved negotiating skills, and the benefits of collective action. However, the national discourse on women's empowerment in Bangladesh frequently fails to adequately represent women's individual identities and 'self'. It also analyses that the emphasis on the national discourse of women's empowerment has been on economic and political empowerment for collective gains. As a result, the subtle and personal aspects of empowerment that reflect women's true autonomy and self-representation have been overlooked throughout the decades. This insight underlines the importance of balancing collective empowerment with individual empowerment, as well as ensuring that women's voices and identities are fully recognised and appreciated in national discourse.

## **Conclusion**

This article examines the history of women's empowerment through a feminist lens. Despite global research on agency dating back to the early 1970s, countries such as Bangladesh have frequently disregarded the promotion of agency in women's everyday lives. The study critically evaluates Bangladesh's national discourse on women's empowerment, examining how income generation has translated into women's ability to exert choices and decisions at an individual level.

Based on the overall research on the national discourse of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, a few points of discussion may emerge. First, evidence from GO and NGO efforts to empower women in Bangladesh since independence indicates that women's financial participation is associated with overall national economic growth. Second, those efforts were primarily intended to increase income-generating activities for poor, marginalised women in rural communities. While interventions aim to develop resources and achievements, the issue of enhancing agency in women's personal lives remains unresolved. Third, while such initiatives (such as microcredit) have aimed to empower women by increasing economic participation and market access, their major focus has been on collective empowerment. These interventions also emphasised household welfare through women's economic

participation rather than providing women with the opportunity to negotiate their own agentic choices and decisions within households. As a result, while empowerment is widely used to describe women's self-actualisation, increased negotiation abilities, and the benefits of collective action, it is unclear how these approaches represent women's individual notions of 'self'.

This analysis lays the groundwork for a more in-depth investigation into how empowerment as a concept should be viewed from a feminist standpoint in Bangladesh. This can also assist policymakers and women's rights advocates in developing more women-friendly empowerment projects that address their lack of influence over choices and decisions in everyday life.

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