

Group-based Micro-borrowers Social Space Development Policies in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Grameen Bank Sixteen Decisions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief looks at Grameen Bank (GB) microcredit Sixteen Decisions policies to examine the degree to which women borrowers of the Grameen Bank are empowered to participate in familial decision-making around the management of income and expenditures, and to examine women borrowers' engagement in community activities. This policy brief is based on previous GB microcredit research conducted by the author. Results show that GB policies have resulted in the increased participation of women in households and communities, but also show a movement toward development. Using the case of Bangladesh, this policy brief recommends that GB should include gender equality in its Sixteen Decisions to address the role of women.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief examines whether the Grameen Bank (GB) Sixteen Decisions can adequately enhance the developmental status of GB women borrowers and emancipate them from the dominance of their male partners in their household and community life. It further explores GB Sixteen Decisions policies, the barriers GB borrowers face, and the leadership of GB women borrowers and their ability to transfer their leadership skills to other public spaces. It finds that support is needed for GB women borrowers to take part in decisions that pertain to the family and the community.

Grameen Bank is group-based microcredit that is provided to poor women in Bangladesh. Its Sixteen Decisions policies aim to economically and socially empower women borrowers. The Sixteen Decisions policies are the focal point of GB's efforts to improve the economic plight of women and their families, to develop community space, to promote anti-dowry and anti-teenage marriages campaigns, as well as women's collectivity development in their community. These policies (see Appendix) and their implementation by GB women borrowers are the driving force behind leadership development by promoting borrowers' participation in the neighbourhood GB groups and centres, and their ability to understand as well as follow the Sixteen Decisions.

Yet, GB women borrowers are limited by Bangladesh's patriarchal society and social structures in the family and community (Goetz). Women are considered secondary members of the family in Bangladesh and hold even less power in the community where males dominate (Belal; Jahan). Microcredit institutions (MFIs) do not look at oppressive situations that affect women's self-esteem. These issues require more attention. GB should include gender equality in its Sixteen Decisions to address the role of women in Bangladesh. Female participation in decision-making practices will drive them to improve their overall family well-being and liberate them from male exploitation.

POLICY CRITIQUE

Below is an analysis of the Grameen Bank Sixteen Decisions policies, their gaps, and policy suggestions that could help the effective empowerment of GB women borrowers. Through GB loans, 8.5 million rural-poor borrowers in 83,967 villages in Bangladesh (GB Monthly Report) increased their income, created assets for their families, and reduced the poverty cycle in Bangladesh (Ahmed and Hakim; Chu; Khandker; Yunus). A repayment rate of 97 per cent has been sustained since 1979. Moreover, 58 per cent of GB women borrowers have crossed the poverty line. For example, more are able to afford/fulfill their basic needs, including: food (three meals a day), clothing, shelter, child education, use of mosquito nets, and access to medicine. These figures highlight the seemingly positive impact of the Sixteen Decisions on reducing poverty and promoting a space for women in their communities. However, there are also issues related to the empowerment of women in the community as a result of GB loans.

First, although Grameen Bank Sixteen Decisions policies support the empowerment of women borrowers socially and economically, in practice, concerns

still exist regarding GB women borrowers' social space development in Bangladesh. For example, dowries are a conditional demand on girls before marriages. If the female does not meet a dowry demand, the husbands may abuse them mentally and physically. Another social problem is the marriage of teenage girls, who lack physical and mental maturity. These dominant patriarchal values and practices hamper women's development in Bangladesh.

The Sixteen Decisions are silent on gender discrimination and male aggression toward women and therefore do not aim to empower women. Hence, many researchers (Amin, Becker, and Bayes; Goetz; Mahmud; and Mayoux) have argued that the GB must develop additional strategies to raise awareness of gender inequality and the injustice of male domestic violence, while mobilising women to protest various social ills that afflict women. The GB's Sixteen Decisions do speak against dowry, but not forcefully enough. The GB maintains that gender development is an evolutionary process that takes place through women's economic development, as provided through the microcredit program. However, gender equality education for both men and women is essential for the development of equality and consensual decision-making processes (Abendroth).

Second, GB women borrowers need support to take part in decisions that pertain to their family and community. The research conducted on the 7th decision of GB (the promotion of adult education) and the 11th decision (dowry demand) demonstrates that all participants know how to sign their name – which is significant in Bangladesh, where most rural women do not know how to read and write (Belal). Regarding borrowers' education, the data shows that 33 per cent of those who attended centre schooling were illiterate before joining the GB. It has also been shown that those participants have a strong voice in their family, especially concerning their children's education and social issues they were concerned with such as, dowry and teenage marriage. In relation to teenage marriage, the study results indicate that marriages often occur for economic reasons, as it is easier to marry younger girls. Young women are often the victims of dowry, eve teasing, and other forms of harassment. Moreover, parents fear their daughters would otherwise be sexually assaulted or kidnapped. Therefore, teenage marriage is viewed as a form of protection in rural Bangladesh.

Third, the Sixteen Decisions have yielded varying levels of community engagement among women borrowers. In order to understand this variation, the research looked at the 15th decision (participation in the community activities) and 16th decision (resolving social problems). Regarding public space empowerment,

findings indicate that the vast majority of women are participating in community organisations and do not face problems engaging in these activities. It is also indicated that 96 per cent communicate with their neighbours more than once a month and that 56 per cent did not know their neighbours before joining GB. Almost all of them had connections with other NGOs like Annesha, Destiny Life Insurance Company, Nutrition projects, Village Arbitration Committee, Grameen Shikha, among others.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

All of these findings demonstrate some gains for GB women borrowers in their family and community spaces. This suggests that GB policies make an impact. However, raising male awareness among rural elites and rural males about women's social rights and civic participation in the communities is also crucial. In this regard, if GB mounted a strong public campaign against dowry violence and teenage marriage, it would increase the chances of minimising the affects of these social ills. Such a strategy would follow from Gender Development theory (Mies, 1998), which believes gender inequality should be addressed directly rather than through the indirect approach that the GB uses.

This policy brief also calls for a consciousness-raising process to investigate the interplay between the family and community spheres as well as to identify cultural and customary obstacles to the full participation of women in decision-making. The results of this research could provide a basis for overcoming such obstacles and facilitating the inclusion of women in decision-making. An important component of the GB program in achieving this is the education of the future generation. The GB has encouraged the second generation (i.e., the children of borrowers) to pursue higher education by providing them with education loans. Moreover, GB's sister organisation, Grameen Shakti (Renewable Energy), has a vocational training program where second generation borrowers can receive vocational skills development training to develop transferable skills. These programs are working to empower the next generation of borrowers to ensure long lasting effects of GB policies. Grameen Shikha Newsletter (2009) mentions that GB second generation youth have the skills to lobby for their own rights and are capable of taking action for the rights of marginalised women. Hopefully, through concerted efforts by parties, such as GB borrowers, GB, and other community organisations in Bangladesh, women borrowers and second generations will fill the gender equality gap.

Although Bangladesh has enacted legislation against dowry-related violence called the Dowry Prohibition Act (1980), the act needs to be stringently enforced. The government, especially the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and the Women's Council, should take proactive steps in enforcing the Act. The GB and other NGOs in Bangladesh could launch a massive campaign and lobby the government to enforce the Act more quickly and forcefully. Therefore, a separate activism strategy needs to be developed to address these issues. Although GB's Sixteen Decisions have included economic issues and other social issues, none directly target gender equality and this omission inhibits the family and community development of GB borrowers. Given the influence of the GB, a revision of the Sixteen Decisions with a focus on gender equality is needed.

Overall, the research indicates that progress, especially public space development awareness, has occurred. However, to address social problems (i.e., unethical dowry demands, dowry-related violence and forced teenage marriages), women need the support of agencies to convey their position on various issues, which include protesting unethical dowry demands, teenage marriages, and male domination over women. Moreover, government law enforcement is necessary for accelerating their collective actions. In addition, dowry-related customary laws in Bangladesh need to be reviewed with a view toward achieving gender equality. In Bangladesh, research indicates that agencies like Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Women for Women, and Ain-Shalishi Kendra should represent these marginalised rural women. For example, agencies could extend their reach to support the enforcement of anti-dowry laws and anti-teenage marriages laws in rural areas in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

The GB has been instrumental in providing income-generating opportunities to women and for empowering women through the extension of collateral-free banking (Ahmed and Hakim; Mahmud; and Todd). The research finds that women's dependency on male family members is decreasing and that there is an emerging pattern of more equitable relationships in households and in society. The GB women borrowers are also emerging as a social force to fight prejudices and remove obstacles to economic and social progress in Bangladesh. While women's participation in the GB has resulted in their increased participation in their families and communities, GB Sixteen Decisions policies should further aim to improve gender equality, to ensure women's access to productive resources, to breakdown patriarchal dominance in society, to alter economic and institutional arrangements, and to promote more choices for women.

APPENDIX

Grameen Bank Sixteen Decisions

1. We shall follow and advance the four principles of the Grameen Bank - discipline, unity, courage and hard work - in all walks of our lives.
2. We shall bring prosperity to our families.
3. We shall not live in dilapidated houses. We shall repair our houses and work towards constructing new houses.
4. We shall grow vegetables all year round. We shall eat plenty of them and sell the surplus.
5. During the plantation seasons, we shall plant as many seedlings as possible.
6. We shall plan to keep our families small. We shall minimize our expenditures. We shall look after our health.
7. We shall educate our children and ensure that they can earn to pay for their education.
8. We shall always keep our children and the environment clean.
9. We shall build and use pit-latrines.
10. We shall drink water from tube wells. If it is not available, we shall boil water or use alum, a water purifying agent.
11. We shall not take any dowry at our sons' weddings; neither shall we give any dowry at our daughters' wedding. We shall keep our centre free from the curse of dowry. We shall not practice child marriage.
12. We shall not inflict any injustice on anyone; neither shall we allow anyone to do so.
13. We shall collectively undertake bigger investments for higher incomes.
14. We shall always be ready to help each other. If anyone is in difficulty, we shall all help him or her.
15. If we come to know of any breach of discipline in any centre, we shall all go there and help restore discipline.
16. We shall take part in all social activities collectively.

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