

Women's Leadership Building as a Poverty Reduction Strategy: Lessons from Bangladesh

Ryan Higgitt

Abstract

Expansion of women's political space is a means toward empowering women typically identified in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of less developed countries. Calls for the cultivation of women leaders in turn correspond with attempts to facilitate this expansion. Focusing on Bangladesh in particular, this article deconstructs normative notions of leadership in the context of current gender and development discourse in order to help understand the value of leadership as a women's empowerment variable. Though leadership is a necessary adjunct to collective action, itself oft-considered crucial to social change, insight offered by third wave feminist theorists as to the fallacy of the 'oneness of women' raises questions as to the exact process by which a woman leader is to develop between herself and other impoverished Bangladeshi women a sense of *power with* – i.e., to 'collectively self-objectify' (Drury *et al* 2005). Here I offer an analysis of Bangladeshi nongovernmental organization Nagorik Uddyog's *Grassroots Women's Leadership Network*, a programme whose methodology appears to align markedly well with Spivak's (1987) notion of 'strategic essentialism', and which may serve as a useful model for how to reconcile postmodern feminism with the need for *power with* as a mechanism for social change.

Key Words: women's empowerment, leadership, collective action, strategic essentialism, Bangladesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Bank Group (2006) deems gender equality 'smart economics' in its *Gender Action Plan 2007-2010*.¹ However, questions are increasingly being raised about just how much the empowerment strategies set down in World Bank and International Monetary Fund endorsed Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are actually improving the quality of life of women in less developed countries. Most PRSPs for instance consider expansion of women's economic space as an area of development indicating progress towards empowerment, but qualifications exist as to how much change in women's access to income is sufficient to achieve empowerment goals; particularly in terms of the social relationships embodied in this change and how much they promote new forms of agency for women and increase their strategic potential. For example, in 2007, 3,552 microcredit institutions worldwide reported reaching a total of 106,584,679 'extremely poor' first loan clients; 88,726,893 (83 per cent) of which were women (Microcredit Summit Campaign 2009: 3). It often happens though that increased income resulting from participation in microcredit programmes does not empower women because they have no control over the income. On the contrary, as Cons and Kaprocki (2008) found in their recent study of microcredit in Bangladesh, a country where the total number of female microcredit borrowers is now in excess of 12 million and a country whose first PRSP, entitled '*Unlocking the Potential*' (GoB: 2005), in fact calls for microcredit's 'up-scaling' (p.xviii), women often serve merely as collection agents for their husbands, fathers, and/or sons; bearing the burden of the credit risk while men spend the money.

Expanding women's political space – generally, enabling them to participate more substantively in formal and informal government arrangements and address the relations of power which structure their homes and communities – is another means toward empowering women typically identified in PRSPs. Embracing this idea, many civil society gender activists in turn call for strategies aimed at building women's leadership in order to facilitate women's political participation. But the exact parameters of leadership as an empowerment variable are at least as ambiguous as those of access to income. Though microcredit has been given extensive attention in the literature since it became mainstreamed into the global development agenda in the 1990s, including the potential for enhanced agency resulting from the 'social capital' emerging from group lending programmes (see Dasgupta and Serageldin 2000; Sanyal 2007; Young Larance 2002), relatively little has been written with respect to initiatives designed specifically to develop the leadership capacity of women; even while the priority with which leadership is now bestowed by gender activists (e.g., Afsar and Mahmud 2008; Kabir 2008; Siddique 2008; Raschen and Shah 2006; Banu 2002) indeed compels hard questions as to how it is that instilling in a given woman the qualities of a 'leader' is to enhance that woman's agency as well as that of other women in her community and beyond.² Focusing on Bangladesh in particular, and giving special attention to arguments and insight offered by local (Bangladeshi) development theorists and practitioners, the aim of this article then is to explore these questions, deconstruct prevailing 'common sense' notions of leadership in the context of contemporary development discourse and help shed light on the potential value of leadership building as a poverty reduction strategy.

The article begins with an overview of identified constraints to gender equality in Bangladesh. Appeals for the promotion of women's leadership are located within wider calls for expanding women's political space as a way of breaking down these constraints. Normative understandings of leadership are then framed within the generic '*power within*', '*power to*', and '*power with*' models of empowerment commonly found in contemporary development literature (e.g., Kabeer 1994; Mayoux 2001; Parpart *et al* 2002; Rowlands 1998; Sabhlok 2006). Against this backdrop I draw upon existing critical examinations of (i) microcredit and (ii) gender quotas in electoral politics to remind us of two key yet clearly incongruous things: that the shared aspects of subordination among women points to their disempowerment being collectively enforced and hence collectively changeable (Kabeer 1994: 253), and the reality that, as Mohanty (1988) says, women are not a coherent group 'solely on the basis of a particular economic system or policy' (p.72) but rather are constituted as 'women' through a complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks. This is, it seems, the crucial paradox. Given the ideological basis of gender subordination, the benefits of initiatives designed to build women's leadership at the grassroots level indeed appear to lie less in the potential for increasing numbers of

women possessing the knowledge, skills, confidence, or assertiveness required for making decisions on par with men at all levels of society and more in the potential for social transformation flowing from the actions of groups of women possessing a shared identity as both objects of domination and potential resistance. But how to reconcile the need for '*power with*' with third wave feminists' insight that 'women' are not a universal category? In response to this question I seek to do two things: First, borrowing from literature in social psychology, I frame the vague and indeterminate concept of *power with* within the more nuanced and precise notion of 'collective self-objectification' (Drury *et al* 2005). Then I draw attention to the measure of relative success one Bangladeshi human rights NGO, Nagorik Uddyog, seems to have achieved in its women's empowerment efforts. Specifically, Nagorik Uddyog's *Grassroots Women's Leadership Network* programme brings rural women together to directly face discrete challenges unique to them in their specific socio-cultural milieu; in particular, lack of access to justice in the otherwise male-dominated rural Bangladeshi community court known as '*Shalish*', effectively the only judicial institution available to poor rural Bangladeshis. In my analysis, the methodology undergirding this programme appears to in fact align itself markedly well with the notion of 'strategic essentialism' put forward by Indian feminist and postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak – a weighted kind of 'we [women] are one' thinking Spivak sees as valuable in the pursuance of a 'scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak 1987: 205).

Conventional theory predicts that increasing a woman's leadership capacity – i.e., her *power within* and *power to* – leads to the enhanced agency of other women ('followers') as expressed through greater decision making ability and actions unconstrained by dominating forces. But because empowerment is strongly influenced by shared values, norms, beliefs, and traditions, that is, by culture, targeting an individual woman for leadership training, working to cultivate her *power within* and *power to*, although a step in the right direction, may fail to actually empower her if the surrounding culture remains unchallenged. Likewise there is no guarantee that one woman's possession of *power within* and *power to* will engender the kind of collective self-objectification – i.e., *power with* – between her and other women otherwise essential for challenging those dominant ideologies that work to subordinate women as a whole. Studies of microcredit and gender quotas in government underscore both these points. Altogether then, insofar as grassroots level agency exercised on a collective basis can translate into structural transformation, there is evidence that those saddled with the task of developing women's leadership building strategies for a PRSP, Bangladesh's included, may be well advised to aspire for programmes entailing a '*power with* via strategic essentialism' approach. That is, an approach to stimulating a sense of collective self-objectification among a given group of women whereby universal notions of 'womenness' are

continuously criticized even while others, recognized as at least affording that group of women a foothold in a political matter they consider important to them, are embraced as needed.

2. CONSTRAINTS TO GENDER EQUALITY IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh, predominantly Muslim and with a high degree of religiosity, is one of the world's most impoverished countries with more than half of its population estimated to live below the poverty line and more than a third (35 per cent) living in extreme poverty (Chowdhury 2005: 22). Moreover, Bangladeshi women, above all those in rural areas, remain the poorest of the poor; faring worse than men on almost every measure (Alam and Karim 2007; Mahtab 2007; Naz 2006; Hashmi 2000). They get less food: women wage earners in poor households consume on average 1.3 meals a day as compared to 2.4 eaten by men (Mahtab 2007); they are less educated: the female literacy rate is only 48 per cent compared with 59 per cent for males (United Nations 2007); they get less health care: medical expenditure in the typical household is 45 per cent on women and 55 per cent on men (Stalker 1995); and compared with 55 per cent of men, only 45 per cent of women in Bangladesh own a second set of clothes, a pair of shoes or some warm clothing (Hamid 1996: 86). Further still, Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world where women on average die younger than men (Mahtab 2007): there are only 962 females for every 1,000 males – almost 3 million women are 'missing' (Hudson and Den Boer 2005: 20).³

Highly asymmetrical gender relationships are of course evident in the realm of formal Bangladeshi politics as well. Though there are currently about 12,828 elected women members in the 4,198 Union Parishads (the lowest tier of Bangladeshi government) throughout the country, the great majority of these women do not have clear job descriptions or resources and function mostly through negotiation with the Union Parishad's Chairman and other Union Parishad members (World Bank 2008: 11).

Religion is well recognized as playing a major role in sanctioning many cultural norms and practices (e.g., the patrilineal organization of households, patrilineal inheritance systems, dowry and early marriage) that underpin women's subordinate status (Kabeer 2002; see also Hamid 1996; Mahtab 2007), but there is almost certainly a close connection between religion and the chronic absence of women's voices in formal government too, especially at its lower echelons. As the interpreters-*cum*-custodians of the *Sharia* (Islamic law), *mullas* (male religious teachers or leaders) often operate as accessories to or collaborators with the powerful village elders (*matabars* or *matbars*) as well as elected members of the Union Parishads (Hashmi 2000: 98). Although the central principles of state policy contained in Bangladesh's Constitution impose a positive duty on the State to protect the rights of the poor and marginalized, in many instances religious and civil laws, socio-culturally knotted, contradict women's human rights and curtail their mobility (Dunn *et*

al 2000). The practice of *purdah* – the religiously imbued physical segregation of the sexes and the requirement of women to cover their bodies and conceal their form – in particular continues to keep many women out of the political arena and confine them to the household. In Bangladesh, with increasing conservatism and fundamentalism, *purdah* is widely considered good behavior from a religious point of view. It is not just a way that a family signals its economic superiority to others in their village, but also, because of its religious connotations, a way of commanding respect in a way that money alone does not (Abdullah and Zeidenstein 1982: 56). Bangladeshi men whose wives practice *purdah* are in fact less likely to say they have been violent to their wives, a statistic which ‘seems to confirm that if men perceive women to be conforming to accepted norms, they are less likely to inflict violence, but where women seem to depart from these norms they are punished’ (World Bank 2008: 16).

3. LEADERSHIP BUILDING AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL SPACE

A major thematic argument that ran through *Unlocking the Potential* was a need for women's increased representation and participation in institutional structures at all levels of Bangladeshi society. Yet the lack of women's voices in formal politics, as Rita Asfar and Nehraz Mahmud (2008) of Dhaka NGO Steps Towards Development argue, indeed raises suspicion as to the commitment of the country's political establishment to devote resources to policies and programmes aiming at women's empowerment (p.38). In ‘Tall Targets and Little Achievements’, their independent review of the treatment of gender issues in *Unlocking the Potential*, Asfar and Mahmud pointed to the Government's proposal to reserve for women one-third of seats in local bodies and the national parliament as positive in terms of encouraging women leaders to participate in political processes, but insist, nevertheless, that ‘much remains to be done to make Bangladesh's PRSP an effective policy guideline towards women's advancement’ (p.33).

Asfar and Mahmud are by no means the only Bangladeshi development theorists stressing the importance of women's leadership. A number of other local civil society representatives, after reviewing *Unlocking the Potential*, called for those in public office to set down specific plans for promoting women's leadership directly into future versions of the country's PRSP, including ‘*Steps Toward Change: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction-II*’, Bangladesh's PRSP covering the period FY09-FY11. Kaniz N. Siddique (2008), for example, demanded the recommendation of initiatives designed to build leadership among women as a means toward ensuring greater involvement of women in village and community level political activities (p.22). Rokeya Kabir (2008) was more direct still: ‘Nowhere [in *Unlocking the Potential*] has any measure to combat entrenched patriarchal attitudes which seek to keep many social and political spaces off-

limits to women been suggested' (p.4; brackets mine). 'Leadership development oriented programmes should be undertaken, both by the Government and by NGOs' (p.28).⁴

These suggestions for an improved formal poverty reduction strategy for Bangladesh resonate with the broader global recognition within feminist intellectual circles that poverty has both economic and non-economic dimensions – i.e., that deconstructing the household, the sphere of reproduction, women's livelihoods, incomes and employment, as well as analyses of gender implications of budget priorities and public spending, should include recognition of issues of vulnerability, powerlessness, voicelessness and male-biased governance systems. Siddique's insistence that 'women's subordination is embedded in values manifested in social norms as well as institutional, economic and political arrangements' (2008: 40) reflects, for example, the position taken by Caroline Sweetman (2001) of Oxfam. 'As long as leadership is male-dominated', says Sweetman, 'gender biases in distribution and control of resources will remain and women will continue to be more vulnerable to economic poverty and social marginalization' (p.3). Karen Mokate of the Inter-American Institute for Social Development makes a similar argument. For Mokate (2005),

Promoting women's leadership in economic activity, professional organizations, labor or trade unions and politics at community and national levels is an obvious strategy for promoting women's participation in effective responses to community issues and in turn creating opportunities for empowerment of women and their integration into public activity (p.xvii).⁵

But there is a disconnect. None of these appeals include explicit explanation as to how it is exactly that increasing the leadership qualities of a given woman is to raise that woman's hierarchical position in a given political arena while simultaneously promoting new forms of agency for other women in her community; transforming them, as a collective, from largely disenfranchised subjects to agents of social change. Such explanations are critical. 'Common sense' assumptions surely need to be broken down, laid bare and, if need be, challenged if leadership building schemes included in a PRSP are to be in any way successful.

4. LEADERSHIP AS *POWER WITHIN*, *POWER TO*, AND *POWER WITH*

Explicating the interface between leadership and empowerment, despite common understandings of what a 'leader' is and does, is clearly not easy. Generally, when we hear someone say 'the group lacks a leader' most of us have an idea of what this person means. We share appreciation for the myriad qualities considered to constitute a leader – charisma for example, possession of which, said Max Weber (1947), causes an individual to be 'set apart from ordinary men [sic] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' (p.358).⁶ We are also familiar with the kinds of effects leadership can have on group ability and performance. That leadership as an abstraction enjoys such a high level of

accessibility and use in regular everyday discourse likely has much to do with the fact that the word 'leadership' is highly malleable, holding different meanings in different contexts. Among other things, we can define leadership as (a) the capacity or ability to lead: '*she demonstrated strong leadership in her first term in office*', or (b) the activity of leading: '*her leadership inspired the team*'.⁷ As we have seen however, there is a pervasive tendency in the literature to neglect making such semantic distinctions; the effect of which is a proclivity to conflate leadership as asset with leadership as process. This conflation may account for a measure of development theorists' apparent disinclination to take up the task of firmly pinning down causal relationships between leadership, social movements, and social change.

Short of asking Siddique, Kabir, Sweetman and Mokate for their respective definitions, if we accept that their advocating of women's leadership building flows from a normative conception of a leader as a change agent, a person whose acts, in part by virtue of their charisma, affect other people more than other people's acts affect them, then under this conception a Bangladeshi woman in public office should be able to serve as a voice for women as a whole in policy deliberations, helping to mainstream a gender perspective into organizational structures and shaping the views and attitudes of other government actors in ways favorable to the feminist agenda. At the same time, this woman, sharing an identity as 'woman' with others in her wider community, would presumably inspire and mobilize other women to act for certain goals in their day-to-day lives that represent the values and motivations (the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations) of women as a whole. Within this framework empowerment can be understood as occurring in accordance with existing theory which holds that increases in individual-level personality traits like charisma, but also self-esteem, self-confidence, assertiveness, courage and self-belief (what the literature [e.g., Kabeer 1994; Mayloux 2001; Parpart 2002; Rowlands 1998; Sabhlok 2006] commonly refers to as *power within*) correlate positively with increases in *power to* – a woman's capacity to affect the pattern of outcomes in situations of interpersonal decision making in ways beneficial to that woman.⁸ To 'build' women leaders thus is to select individual women regarded as possessing the potential for leadership; train them, mentor them, and engage them in activities which enhance their *power within* and subsequently their *power to*. This is to simultaneously set in motion an exponential process of leadership creation, a chain reaction of sorts, such that these new leaders build the *power within* and *power to* of other women around them. 'Followers' empower still more women, and so on. *Power with* emerges as *power within* and *power to* become the possession of a group of women united in pursuance of their common interests as 'women'. The whole here, critically, is to be greater than the sum of the individuals. In Rowlands' (1998) words, 'One woman standing up against an unjust law is unlikely to achieve much on her own; many women working together, however, are more likely to provoke change' (p.14).

The main problem with the basic assumptions this framework is premised upon, I argue, has to do with the extent that social change depends upon collective action and, likewise, as Parpart *et al* (2002) claim, empowerment involves the exercise of power rather than simply the possession of power. The shared aspects of subordination among women points to their disempowerment being collectively enforced and hence collectively changeable. At the same time, collective action, as is well documented in social psychology literature, requires that participants in a given group, among other prerequisites (see Evans 1980), realize a shared identity against the power of a dominating force – a process that Drury *et al* (2005) refer to as ‘collective self-objectification’, and a term I think is useful as a more concrete definition of *power with* within the context of leadership building as a poverty reduction strategy. The preconditions for collective self-objectification are in-group unity and hence expectations of in-group mutual support for in-group normative action (2005: 322). But there can be no guarantee that a given woman leader can or will induce such unity between and among other women in her community. Case studies of some developing countries’ implementation of quota systems in electoral politics, Bangladesh included, remind us that increased numbers of women representatives in formal government, a manifest motive underpinning many calls for leadership building, does not necessarily influence social realities. For that matter, as some studies of microcredit suggest, there is no guarantee that change in an individual woman’s *power within* and *power to* will actually transform her own position in a given political arrangement, formal government or otherwise. In Bangladeshi society, as in all societies, opportunities are not equally distributed between all peoples, but rather are multiply stratified in accordance with the multiple identities that flow from formal and informal membership in myriad social groups. Empowerment cannot transcend power relations, but rather is enmeshed in relations of power at all levels of society (Parpart *et al* 2002). In this context of structural poverty and exclusion, efforts to empower women at the level of individual may hence be futile or, in some cases, even costly.

Microcredit and gender quotas in government are not the only examples that can help highlight the ideological basis of gender subordination while exposing potential limitations or hazards of targeting selected women; training them, mentoring them, building their *power within* and *power to* so that they might on their own challenge dominating forces while simultaneously making ‘leaders’ of other women of whom they putatively share a universal identity. Research on purdah, as we have seen, indicates that when individual women from Islamic countries with a high degree of religiosity like Bangladesh resist the practice of seclusion they risk serious sanction from other members of their community.⁹ But microcredit and gender quotas in government do stand out in their high degree of cross-national applicability and may tell us important things about those ‘*power within* and *power to* invoke *power with*’ assumptions that seem to prevail in current

development discourse. In turn, they can also tell us important things about the utility of leadership building programmes incorporating as part of their methodologies an acknowledgment of the exceedingly delicate nature of collective self-objectification.

5. IDEOLOGY, METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM, AND ESSENTIALISM

i. Lessons from microcredit

Most NGOs in the development sector looking to empower women emphasize establishing or enhancing a woman's *power within*, understanding that without first possessing, to some measure, self-esteem, self-confidence and a feeling of self-worth a woman will never be able to fully self-actualize. *Power to*, also known as generative or productive power, is the critical step beyond *power within*; concerned with the creation of new possibilities and actions free of external influence, control or domination. This includes the capacity of an actor to affect the pattern of outcomes in situations of interpersonal decision making in ways favorable to that actor. The *power to* model of empowerment has long underpinned a great deal of the Women in Development (WID) literature, evident for instance, as Kabeer (1994) notes, in attempts to measure the statistical frequency with which women and men make decisions in different areas of household activity and to demonstrate that women are likely to exercise greater decision making ability in households where they have access to income (p.225). But does change in a woman's *power to* really transform her position in the various political arrangements of her life? If not, why?

Fifteen years ago, in his study of microcredit in Zimbabwe, Gibbon (1995) found that the micro-enterprises undertaken in the informal sector by women borrowers in fact often reinforced women's reliance on male family members as the main link in the market. In Bangladesh, Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) similarly found that not only does increased income among women potentially lead to increases in domestic violence, but at the same time a significant proportion of women's microcredit loans (and the income generated from the micro-enterprises flowing from these loans) are directly invested by their male relatives; even while women borrowers continue to bear the liability for repayment. Recent studies raise doubt as to just how much the situation has changed in the last decade and a half. According to Cons and Paprocki (2008), despite the central claim and goal of many microfinance institutions to empower women and promote gender equality by elevating women's status in household decision making, women in fact remain more often conduits to, rather than end users of, credit. '*Women take microcredit as their husbands order them to do so,*' one Bangladeshi microcredit borrower told them. '*When their husbands fail to pay the installment, then NGO workers abuse the women a lot. Women have to bear the pressure coming from both sides*' (p.3). This pressure, added to that inherent in the existing unequal distribution of responsibilities between men and women in traditional South Asian domestic spheres, causes some

women who take a microloan to actually feel worse off than ever. Expressing her despair in facing this situation personally, Bidi, a rural Indian woman who borrowed just over 3,800 rupees (60-euros) ten years ago, told Radio Netherlands Worldwide in 2009 that '*Suicide is the only way out*'.¹⁰ In Bangladesh, it is worth noting, microcredit's traditional 'hotbed', available data indicate that suicide rates among women and girls (otherwise already far outnumbering that of men and boys) have actually increased over the past three decades (see Naved and Akhtar 2008: 443-444).¹¹

The massive body of existing literature claiming positive correlations between microcredit and women's empowerment, including the World Bank's *Policy Research Working Paper No. 2998* (Pitt *et al* 2001), has bolstered the growth of microcredit programmes throughout Bangladesh and other countries of the Global South.¹² Yet the above findings and others, though relatively few and far between, are undoubtedly helpful to development practitioners looking to optimize the impact of microcredit schemes. For one, they suggest that even today at least some credit and income generating programmes frame the problem of poverty as a temporary and easily remedied issue of cash flow as opposed to one which bears on relations of inequality and their institutionalization in broader social and economic policy. They also help confirm that the disempowered position of poor women is embedded in social groups and determined by collective cultural experience and that unequal power relations inside and outside the home as well as restrictions on women's mobility are manifestations of this determination.

Poor women in many developing countries clearly demonstrate a dependence on those who hold the balance of power – i.e., male members of their family and community – for their survival. This is particularly true in Bangladesh, where rural women largely rely on relationships which position them as dependents with little prospect of demanding justice (Kabeer 2003). The arenas in which women receiving enhanced *power within* and *power to* via any leadership building schemes set down in future Bangladesh PRSPs must do battle is of course the very same as those receiving microcredit. Just as income from microcredit gives women access to power, so too does increased confidence, knowledge and courage. But individual women receiving leadership training, just as it is for those receiving microcredit, in many cases may face situations where challenging the power of a dominating force in a given institutional structure means potentially gambling away their survival strategies. Rowlands' (1998) insight into the role played by the internalization of control in relationships of domination and subordination helps illuminate this risk-reward equation. For Rowlands, 'a woman who is subjected to violent abuse when she expresses her own opinions may start to withhold her opinions and eventually come to believe she has no opinions of her own. When control becomes internalized in this way, overt use of *power over* [by the abuser] is no longer necessary' (p.12; italics and brackets mine). In turn, for the abused, this learned helplessness may be better than facing the terrible implications of her disempowerment.

Shalish, Bangladesh's traditional rural dispute mediation system, is a prime example of a locus of group-based internalization of control in practice. The structure of the traditional *Shalish* reflects the unequal class and gender hierarchy characterizing social relations in broader Bangladeshi society. By convention, those who make decisions in *Shalish* are almost always men, usually elders, drawn from the elite and powerful sections of the community. Rulings on matters of custom or religion tend to be made on the basis of personal (and highly patriarchal) interpretations of texts and community norms as opposed to reference to formal legal frameworks (Siddiqi 2004: 11). Women are not only prevented from making their voices heard in *Shalish*, but their very presence even on the margins of a public hearing is strongly discouraged (p.11). Socialized into a culture of hierarchy and deference, women in the community commonly understand *Shalish* as 'a man's place'. Even when they are aware of certain rights, women depending on male social protection may be convinced it is not in their best interest to approach *Shalish* to claim those rights. Raising their voice in hopes of finding justice is could very well cost them more.¹³ Appeals by those with the power to make decisions in *Shalish* to act according to community norms effectively determine people's conduct as members of the community; making *Shalish* an effective tool for disciplining individuals and groups who dare to transgress established social rules while in turn reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

ii. Lessons from gender quotas in electoral politics

While the above studies of microcredit problematize the methodological individualism of the *power within* and *power to* models of empowerment, others of some developing countries' implementation of quota systems in electoral politics take us a step further, illuminating key difficulties inherent in attempting to foster collective self-objectification. Gender quotas themselves are riddled with essentialist assumptions of women as a distinct group with a distinct perspective and the universalization of women as a category. Yet women are not a homogeneous group (Bari 2005: 6). That they are divided along the lines of class, ethnicity, religion, age, and urban/rural backgrounds, not to mention political affiliations and primordial loyalties, holds significant implications for schemes aimed toward breaking down the ideological basis of women's subordination. The 1993-94 elections in India are a standout example. They brought some 800,000 women into active political life as a result of amendments to India's Constitution mandating one-third of the seats in local councils, urban and rural – i.e., the gram Panchayats (GP) – be allotted to women. The same amendments demanded that 15 per cent of seats be reserved for India's excluded and 'other backward' castes and tribes (including the Dalit, the lowest of the Hindu castes; otherwise known in South Asian cultures as 'untouchables') of which women comprise half but have no distinct political existence (Vyasulu and Vyasulu: 41). The GPs, representing several villages or neighborhoods in a given locality, were given the responsibility for designing,

implementing, and monitoring social services, including health and education, as well as anti-poverty programmes. But the increased number of women in electoral politics has had mixed results in terms of addressing social injustice and women's poverty (Haritas 2008; Kudva 2003; Stephen 2001).

Why? One reason is that the women who came to office actually tended to base their actions along caste rather than gender lines. They were indeed relentlessly reminded of their respective caste positions – Palanithurai (2007), examining the effects of the quota system in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, found that Dalit women who took up office are not even provided with a chair to sit in when they visit higher state officials (p.104). At the same time, though their inexperience in government meant that their political outlooks were likely less skewed by past practices, in many cases the women who came to office were illiterate, poor and landless, and served merely as surrogates for husbands and fathers who could not contest seats in the GP as a consequence of the imposed quota. Vyasulu and Vyasulu (2000), in their study of the south-west Indian state of Karnataka, found that in fact many women were put in place by the wealthy and powerful in order to serve as puppets for these people's particular vested interests; with those few that did not serve as surrogates often facing rejection by those who saw them as lacking the credentials for holding public office in the first place, alienating them and making it difficult for them to succeed (p.45).

Formal Bangladeshi laws introduced in 1997 likewise require that a specified number of women are to be elected directly by the people into reserved seats in local government. But these women function in a socio-cultural milieu very similar to their Indian counterparts. This includes casteism, an oft-overlooked reality of Bangladeshi society. The Muslim faith has predominated in Bangladesh since the arrival of Islamic missionaries and Arab traders on the country's shores centuries ago, but the Muslim community's close historical contact with India's Hindu culture is evident in, among other things, an estimated 3.5 to 5.5 million Bangladeshi citizens today identifying themselves as Dalit (Higgitt 2009). Is it thus merely a coincidence that, as Chowdhury (2002) says, 'Bangladesh's experience with quotas for women in parliament has been largely negative' (p.50)?

As in India, traditional definitions of appropriate domains of male and female responsibility keep rural Bangladeshi women in the home or fields and inhibit their wholehearted devotion to the work involved in public office (see Banu 2002). Those who do find their way into local government via special measures, as noted earlier, are often unaware of their powers or their responsibilities toward their constituencies. The grinding poverty in which most of Bangladesh's people live, especially women, makes the ideals of democracy and ethics simply distant concepts. Genuine attempts to introduce a gender perspective see Bangladeshi women in office risk their own

position in the political establishment. The orders for change to India's political system did not stem from any mass campaign spearheaded by women's organizations or grassroots movements, but instead resulted largely from the efforts of the Janata Dal, the political party that swept the country's national elections in 1989, to appear closer to the vast majority of India's people than the Congress Party that had hitherto ruled the country since independence (Vyasulu and Vyasulu: 42). In the case of Bangladesh, the orders came during the reign of Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) and the newly re-elected Sheikh Hasina (Awami League), two women who have alternated as prime minister (the highest leadership position in Bangladeshi politics) since 1991. And the country has seen only marginal gender equality progress in this time. In fact, since 1997 increases in violence against Bangladeshi women have been reported across the board (see Khan 2005); tellingly, even while both Zia and Hasina remain extremely popular among Bangladesh's masses.¹⁴

As a whole then, that women's oppression in Bangladesh remains so pervasive suggests a couple of important things in the context of women's leadership building as a poverty reduction strategy. First, it underscores an argument that the form of representative democracy practiced in this country, perhaps even more so than in India, sees voting behavior of the large majority of electorates, including women, determined by primordial loyalties and patriarchal relations. Second, coupled with the case studies of microcredit, it similarly points toward a need for the inclusion of the concept of *power with* as a women's empowerment variable; albeit, critically, one that is highly refined in response to the hazards posed by universalizing women as a distinct category.¹⁵

6. POWER WITH VIA STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

Postcolonial development theory, and critical theory more generally, has long grappled with the question of how to find a coherent position between the dilemmic options of naïve objectivism and rootless relativism with respect to identity politics. Spivak has developed a system of thought, articulated particularly in her 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (1985), which argues that a nuanced strategy in relation to essentialism is ideal. Though she is deeply suspicious of essentialist categories such as 'Third World' and 'woman', stressing in typical deconstructionist fashion that they are based upon artificial and unstable binary oppositions, she also recognizes that sometimes there are moments when it is nevertheless necessary to speak 'as a woman' or 'as an Asian' in order to challenge the hegemony of colonial discourse. The 'subaltern' must thereby recognize the political purchase afforded it when it embraces an essentialized definition of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, gender, etc.; but it must, at the same time, always be very cautious, even tactical, in its approach. Specifically, internal differences and debates relating to the particular essentialized definition chosen need to be preserved so as to avoid becoming helplessly mired in the quicksand that otherwise is essentialism. This, says Spivak, entails recognition on the part of the

subaltern of the complexities of occupying a subject-object position. More simply, it means the subaltern must continually critique the essentialized definition it has chosen even while embracing it. As applied to feminism then, the goal of strategic essentialism is to take on foundational definitions of 'woman' when and where necessary and apply those definitions toward discrete political ends; all the while critiquing the very concept of 'woman' itself.

A number of development organizations operating in the Global South today incorporate the notion of *power with* in to their efforts to address inequality and improve the lives of women.¹⁶ In Bangladesh, Grameen Bank and BRAC stand out as large and prominent institutions known to complement their respective group-based lending programs with varied social services, including awareness training and social mobilization. They stress the importance of creating opportunities for poor women to spend time with each other, to network, build their social capital, reflect on their situation, recognize the strengths they do possess and devise strategies to achieve positive change. There are NGOs in Bangladesh however whose empowerment strategies strictly emphasize non-economic dimensions of poverty; eschewing forms of service provision in favour of activities that work to mobilize the poor and marginalized to claim their entitlements and demand their rights as Bangladeshi citizens. Much has been written about Nijera Kori and its effort to address the 'rights deficit' suffered by Bangladesh's poor via a focus on collective rather than individual capabilities (e.g., Banerjee *et al* 2004; Kabeer 2002; 2003; Khan and Khan 2000). Here I highlight the work of Nagorik Uddyog. Translated as '*The Citizen's Initiative*', Nagorik Uddyog is a small, local-level NGO whose 'Grassroots Women's Leadership Network' (GWLN) is becoming increasingly recognized as making respectable inroads with regards to empowering poor rural Bangladeshi women; in particular bringing women together in pursuance of a more just, equitable and participatory *Shalish*. The exact reasons for the successes of the GWLN, modest as they might be, are hard to identify unequivocally. But it does at least appear, I argue, that the methodology and theoretical commitments that shape this programme in fact resonate strongly with Spivak's strategic essentialism – a fairer *Shalish* being indeed a 'scrupulously visible political interest'. A rigorous empirical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Nagorik Uddyog's work is well beyond the scope of this paper. But I do offer an overview of the design and process of the GWLN programme as well as quantitative and qualitative data on GWLN results and impacts; the aim being an attempt to help shed important and timely light on how insight offered by third wave feminists as to the fallacy of the 'oneness of women' might be reconciled with the need for *power with* in the context of leadership and positive social change.

Information provided was gathered via two basic research approaches: On the one hand, a review of Nagorik Uddyog's own documentation of its activities, including data on Nagorik Uddyog-supported *Shalish* hearings involving members of the GWLN, as well as available

secondary literature on GWLN impacts and results. On the other, interviews with Nagorik Uddyog staff, non-participant observation of GWLN meetings, and focus-group discussions and one-to-one in-person interviews with GWLN programme participants I carried out in three Nagorik Uddyog working areas (the Bangladesh districts of Rangpur, Tangail and Borisal) between March and August, 2008.

7. NAGORIK UDDYOG

Nagorik Uddyog was established in 1995 by a small group of Bangladeshi development theorists and practitioners whom shared commitment to the idea that private life, like public life, has a political nature, and that rural Bangladeshi women must be given the power to participate substantively in all those institutional structures where decisions are made that affect their lives. The organization's efforts to help expand women's political space generally pivot upon two related but separable imperatives: raising women's awareness of their rights as Bangladeshi citizens and, at the same time, building their capacity to pursue these rights (NU 2008: 1). Falling within the scope of what Thornton *et al* (2000) call a 'social mobilization organization', work undertaken by Nagorik Uddyog is guided by a belief that insofar as Bangladeshi women lack the material and political clout to challenge the structure and distribution of entitlements in society, then conscientisation and organization can mobilize the only resources they do have: their capacity to resist and transform by way of their collective strength. This includes recognition that insofar as most rural women rely on relationships which position them as dependents, each woman, on her own, thus possesses little prospect of demanding justice (NU 2008: 4). Altogether then, the primary objective of the organization's GWLN programme – i.e., to create a network of women across some of the poorest regions of Bangladesh whom share a sense of being victims in an unequal distribution of resources and power while simultaneously providing an enabling condition for these women to mobilize themselves and raise a communal voice – can be reasonably understood as motivated principally by a *power with* empowerment model.

GWLN methodology

Nagorik Uddyog starts at the bottom (the 'grassroots'), forming small groups of approximately twenty-five women in a given Union Parishad. Members of a set group convene every four months in intensive two to three-day sessions (usually in a bari or local schoolhouse) where, under the guidance of Nagorik Uddyog staff, they receive training via interactive workshops on their Constitutional rights as Bangladeshi citizens. In these meetings the women openly discuss the current conditions of both their respective individual lives and the conditions of the lives of women in Bangladeshi society as a whole in terms of these rights. This includes critical reflection upon traditional domains of male and female responsibility as well as analysis of the negative

impact of prevalent cultural practices like patrilineal inheritance systems, dowry, child marriage, and female seclusion. Colourfully illustrated flip-charts featuring sketches for instance of a Bangladeshi housewife with ten arms – each busy with a familiar domestic task like childcare, food harvesting and poultry raising – are typically used to initiate topical discussion. Meetings conclude with deliberation as to various strategies the women might take to protest violations of their rights as they may occur in their community while pushing for a broader women's movement. More significantly though, sessions begin with a Nagorik Uddyog facilitator asking the women to introduce themselves using their own names. The facilitator points out that by identifying themselves this way, in a public forum, each woman takes an important first step in asserting her individuality given that Bangladeshi women are customarily identified not as individuals but only with terms describing their respective culturally sanctioned roles – 'daughter', 'wife', 'mother' (Young Larance 1998). Critically, this exercise also allows each participant to understand herself as unique from the other participants in the group even while, as a group, they are intended (in the process of the discussions that follow the introductions) to come to see themselves as collectively sharing certain hardships; feelings, attitudes and perspectives.

The women invited by Nagorik Uddyog to participate in GWLN women's group meetings are perceived to demonstrate an aptitude for leadership, generally on the basis of observed overt expressions of *power within*. Their respective ages, marital statuses, principal occupations, social positions and so on are myriad. Sometimes these women currently hold a formal position in local government. In other cases, though they are not involved in government they are nevertheless recommended by a Union Parishad Chairman or other community authority figure receptive to Nagorik Uddyog motives. More often that not however they are simply village women who offer an enthusiastic response when approached by Nagorik Uddyog for their thoughts on the idea of participating in a women's empowerment programme. Significantly, candidacy has more to do with a given woman's confidence and openness to the idea of gender equality in a specific circumstance like *Shalish* as that women's established hierarchal location in the community. In a conventional scenario, three women members of a Union Parishad in a Nagorik Uddyog working area, two other women from each of the nine wards of that union, and five college-going girls or other interested community women make up a group and participate in the quarterly meetings. Given Nagorik Uddyog's commitment to the principle of empowering women by way of capacity building as opposed to simply providing intervention services, individuals are never paid to attend (Wojkowska 2006: 40).

The twenty five woman upazilla-level GWLN 'group' serves as the core focus of Nagorik Uddyog's *power with* efforts. But it seeks to expand the breadth and amplify the effect of the 'network' as a whole by having each of the upazilla-level groups meet regularly with others in their

district in the form of an annual conference, the first held in 2003.¹⁷ These conferences serve as a sort of regional rallying point, raising and consolidating the hope, confidence, and enthusiasm of the thousands of GWLN members. As at the upazilla level, here the current human rights condition of women in Bangladesh is discussed, activities and initiatives undertaken by upazilla-level GWLN groups over the course of the past year are reviewed, and likewise activities, initiatives and events, including public demonstrations and street marches, in pursuance of GWLN-identified interests are planned for the year to come.

Network expansion also occurs in a downward direction – i.e., by way of each individual member of a GWLN group in turn organizing and leading recurring discussion sessions with their women neighbours, referred to by Nagorik Uddyog as ‘Women’s Group Discussions’. This is intended to provide non-GWLN member women with important ‘physical and psychological room for mutual exchange and encouragement to raise their voices’ (Hombrecher 2007: 71). It also gives GWLN members themselves an important opportunity to exercise their burgeoning *power within* and increase their social capital while simultaneously, albeit slowly, building other women’s awareness of their rights and informally broadening the GWLN’s ideological membership base. Further still, it helps the GWLN keep abreast of current conditions of women’s rights at the grassroots level; identifying any instances where women in a given community may have been victimized as well as strategies for how the women might address a particular victimization and seek retributive justice. Often this includes members of the GWLN taking the decision to, typically with the accompaniment and support of Nagorik Uddyog, partake in *Shalish*.¹⁸

GWLN impacts and results

From 2002-03, a total of 309 training sessions and women’s group discussions were held in GWLN project areas; with approximately 10,000 women participating (NU 2004: 4). And ‘[t]he strategy of nurturing potential women leaders who are confident, creative *and* armed with knowledge appears to be paying dividends’ (Siddiqi 2004: 16; italics Siddiqi’s). Foremost, there has been a perceptible change in the results of *Shalish* hearings where decisions are made affecting women. According to Nagorik Uddyog, women are now, among other benefits, receiving the property and/or money (legally due to them) otherwise typically denied by *Shalish*. Though longitudinal data is limited in both availability and scope, Nagorik Uddyog claims that in the year 2006 to 2007, Nagorik Uddyog facilitated *Shalish* saw in total Tk.1,327,100 (more than US\$19,000) paid to 61 women in the form of alimony, maintenance and dowry fees (NU 2007: 7). Numbers increased in the period 2007 to 2008, where 68 women received a total of Tk.1,388,930 (\$20,013) (NU 2008: 7). And they rose even more dramatically a year later, with 189 rural Bangladeshi women receiving financial benefits; money which ‘[helped] provide these women with important financial security, and in some cases allowed some to buy cropland, build a house or invest in a

small business' (NU 2009: 8). In one example, Swaminathan, Bhatla and Chakraborty (2007) of the International Center for Research on Women report that Jahanara, deserted by her husband and left alone to care for her son, brought her case to *Shalish*. She and her husband agreed to formally separate and she was awarded Tk. 25,000 (\$360) in unpaid child support. 'With Nagorik Uddyog's help, she [then] bought 0.36 acres of land and now earns about Tk. 6,500 (\$94) per month. She is happy about her ability to make a living and feels that she is a respected member of her community' (p.15).

Are the relatively favourable outcomes for GWLN members in *Shalish* a function of their 'increased empowerment' or are they merely due to the presence of an authoritative body – Nagorik Uddyog – as intermediary? This is not an easy question to answer. Regardless, the question might be, in some significant respects, moot anyway. In the above reporting periods most complaints heard by *Shalish* in Nagorik Uddyog working areas, according to Nagorik Uddyog, were made by women. If this is so it suggests that women in these regions are indeed becoming increasingly aware of their rights and are likewise increasingly confident in pursuing them. Moreover, regardless of whether the credit for change in *Shalish* participation and results should be given to Nagorik Uddyog or to the 'women leaders', we might reasonably say that this change itself is to some measure redefining the institution of *Shalish* in a ways that challenge de facto assumptions that *Shalish* is 'a man's place'. And when a woman leader returns to her Women's Group Discussions and recounts her accomplishments as they transpired, perhaps to other GWLN women whom have experienced *Shalish* success, this assumedly helps cultivate GWLN in-group unity and hence expectations of in-group mutual support for in-group normative action – i.e., the preconditions for collective self-objectification. My observations of GWLN meetings (including Women's Group Discussions and the 2008 GWLN Annual Conference in Tangail) spread over a period of six months, coupled with qualitative data derived from a series of semi-structured one-to-one interviews (facilitated by a translator) I conducted with GWLN participants, has convinced me that to some extent this appears to be precisely what is happening.

In comparison to GWLN 'newcomers' (those participating in a GWLN meeting for the first time), experienced GWLN members appear to possess a formidable understanding of women's rights and existing legal provisions, and their pro-active pursuance of women's interests sees them in turn increasingly recognized by their neighbours as trusted advisors and consultants in times of need. GWLN member, Nirupama, of Tangail district, vividly described to me in an interview the difference that being part of the GWLN has made in the eyes of others in her community:

Before I never had the confidence to go to *Shalish*, but now I do. In the beginning, my husband and some other local people were opposed to the idea of my participating, but now they have come to accept it. Friends will actually sometimes come to me now so that I can speak on their behalf [in *Shalish*] or help someone they know whose rights may have been violated. I am recognized, accepted, and appreciated. And this makes me want to help more.

GWLN participants are increasingly represented in school management committees, market development committees and village development committees, and a few are active members of local level political parties. Many are engaged in serving their community as voices against violations of women's human rights, including fighting for formal change to marriage registration legislation so as to ensure that a woman's right to divorce is clearly articulated in marriage registration forms (NU 2008). Evidence of collective empowerment can also be found in GWLN members taking the decision to jointly protest to local law enforcement about the bribes police often demand from women seeking help after having been victimized in their home or community. Open dialogs between groups and upazilla-level administrators on specific human rights issues like child marriage, dowry, hilla, and unofficial divorce also occur. Altogether, such activities suggest that participation in the GWLN not only develops an individual women's sense of self and a feeling that they are in control of their lives, but also a sense of a shared identity against the power of dominating forces. The sentiments of GWLN member, Bithika, of Brisna Union, give a clear impression of this:

I enjoy learning new things about women's rights that I did not know before. But more than that, I enjoy the opportunity to meet other women like me and interact. There are a lot of illiterate women in my community, and the training I'm receiving helps me help them pursue justice when they need to. People recognize me now and respect me. Before becoming involved, I was inactive. But now I am busy and move around a lot; which is good for me.

Members of the GWLN aspire to see their organization eventually achieve independence and self-reliance; free from the guidance of Nagorik Uddyog (NU 2007: 9). Nagorik Uddyog shares this vision, understanding however that such autonomy, while ideal, is currently untenable and that the modest gains made via the GWLN in the short time since its establishment in 2000 can quickly dissolve in the face of the otherwise widespread and firmly entrenched social structures in Bangladeshi society which oppress women. Such concern on the part of Nagorik Uddyog perhaps underscores the notion that to some measure this NGO's mere presence in GWLN-attended *Shalish* is in fact a catalyst, if not the catalyst, for any positive change observed. It may even lend weight to an argument that when subaltern ambitions move beyond scrupulously visible political interests – say, to 'the liberation of women' – these ambitions indeed become precariously amorphous and unwieldy; necessitating increasing commitment to essentialist categories just to remain sustainable. But does such an argument not deny the GWLN and its respective individual members their own agency? Would they, for one thing, really 'move beyond scrupulously visible political interests'? Who exactly determines these interests? Indeed, who is the 'leader'?

Regardless, in the context of women's leadership building as a poverty reduction strategy the observable gains made via the GWLN do suggest that over and above those women's empowerment strategies informed by the methodological individualism of *power within* and *power to* models of

empowerment, strategies that likewise include means toward *power with* appear optimally suited to in fact expand women's political space and promote new forms of agency for women within those social institutions like *Shalish* which play a recognized role in the subordination of women in Bangladeshi society. Yet it seems that it must in reality be collective self-objectification of the kind whereby the women whom make up the 'collective' simultaneously recognize inherent differences between the members of the group; recognize themselves as distinct individuals – a curious sort of micro-macro mid-way. Moreover, the political interest pursued must at the same time be clear and present, as per the obvious difference for example between 'greater rights for women' and a 'fairer *Shalish*'.

7. CONCLUSION

Many development theorists and feminist activists call for inclusion in PRSPs strategies directed at building women's leadership as a means toward expanding women's political space. In response to these calls, I set out to assess the merit of a normative conception of leadership (and the value of women's leadership building activities based upon this conception) against the backdrop of prevailing constraints to gender equality. Specifically, appeals for leadership building were framed within an understanding of leadership which holds empowerment as occurring on two related but separable planes: one where the individual woman receiving leadership training is given internal assets (*power within*) which subsequently increase her bargaining power (*power to*), and the other where she, upon possessing *power within* and *power to*, inspires and mobilizes other women of whom she shares a collective identity as 'woman'. Within such a framework, to create women leaders is hence to transmit empowerment exponentially, from one woman to many; with *power with* gradually eroding the firmly entrenched ideological basis of gender subordination.

Though much of the political pressure necessary to ensure delivery of constitutional provisions designed to protect poor women in less developed countries will have to come from the 'grassroots' – i.e., from various forms of agency exercised by, and on behalf of, women seeking to claim their rights in various arenas – such agency must be realized at least as much by collective action as it is at the level of individual. This is not a new argument within contemporary development discourse, but it begs the question of what exactly the links are between leadership, collective action and social change, and likewise forces a close critical look at how much the basic assumptions which inform a normative conception of leadership actually hold water.

Leadership and collective action are profoundly complicated issues to be sure; rooted in, among other things, the complexities of identity politics and social psychology as well as the broader relationship between structure and agency. We might confidently say however that any answer to the question of the link between leadership and collective action must demand inclusion

in a definition of leadership, including those within a women's empowerment context, the notion of *power with*. Yet conventional understandings of leadership in current development discourse appear to either overlook the notion of *power with* or, more typically, misplace it within the erstwhile notions of *power within* and *power to* by assuming it is inherent in women's shared identity as 'women' anyway.

Case studies of microcredit and gender quotas in government remind us of arguments put forward by postmodern feminist theorists that opportunities are not equally distributed between all peoples, but rather are multiply stratified in accordance with the multiple identities emergent from one's membership in myriad and fluid social groups. This plurality of identities appears, paradoxically, at once both a blessing and a curse. Efforts to empower women at the level of individual, as microcredit and gender quotas suggest, may be futile or, in some cases, even costly in the face of a reality that the disempowered position of poor women (their shared terms of recognition) is, at least in part, determined by collective cultural experience. Insofar as women's disempowerment is collectively enforced, collective action is assumedly vital. This in turn requires that a given group realize a shared identity against the power of a dominating force. But embracing an essentialized definition of a particular identity category clearly risks in fact reinforcing the very binary oppositions that have historically worked to subjugate some and privilege others. Taken as a whole then, instilling a sense of collective self-objectification among women must thereby entail grappling with, and indeed accepting, the reality of the multiple and mobile identities which constitute each of the individuals in a given group and forming among and between them, despite these differences, a common, shared identity as objects of both domination and potential resistance. Those who take the identity – in the case of the GWLN, 'women' seeking a fairer *Shalish* – need to be simultaneously critical of that identity; embracing contradictions and conflict and accommodating diversity and change. The need for *power with* does not necessarily negate the utility of *power within* and *power to* models of empowerment or the many development activities that exist which are guided by the methodological individualism of such models. In fact, it seems almost a certainty that *power with* cannot be achieved without some measure of *power within* and *power to* being achieved first. At the very least, given the evidence, it would seem that *power within*, *power to*, and *power with*, as *modes* of empowerment are intrinsically linked and in fact reinforce one another.

The activities of Bangladeshi human rights NGO Nagorik Uddyog may help us continue to put the dynamics of these linkages in perspective. My analysis of Nagorik Uddyog's GWLN is of course limited. It would benefit from, among other things, a comparison with similar schemes in use in South Asia and other regions of the Global South. Questions might also be asked as to exactly how this particular NGO's special focus on *Shalish* over and above other existent political

arrangements making up rural Bangladeshi social life, for example that intrinsic to the home, the fields, the market or even the Union Parishad itself, might account for the measure of success the GWLN appears to have demonstrated. These are important questions. But on the evidence of my work with rural Bangladeshi women participating in the GWLN, it seems that this programme is nevertheless a potentially useful model of a women's leadership building strategy giving primacy to a 'power with via strategic essentialism' approach. The efforts of Nagorik Uddyog appear to have resulted in perceptible expansion of women's political space (manifest in greater substantive participation in *Shalish*) and, in conjunction with other women's empowerment strategies currently taking place in rural Bangladesh, such efforts could have a real, positive long-term impact on the status of women in Bangladeshi society.

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¹ The World Bank's conception of the gendered nature of poverty and the tools it employs to facilitate women's empowerment in practice are explored in *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* (Narayan, 2002).

² Bangladeshi social theorist Sayeda Rowshan Qadir recognized the dearth of research in the area of women's leadership-building in Bangladesh in her *Women Leaders in Development Organizations and Institutions* (1997). Further, not until 2008 did *Gender and Development*, perhaps the leading international journal devoted to gender equality and women's rights in development contexts, give special attention to the leadership issue.

³ For a comprehensive review of the impoverished condition of Bangladeshi women and girls as compared to boys and men, see UNICEF's "Women and Girls in Bangladesh" (2007).

⁴ This recommendation is in fact one of fifteen Kabir makes in total for the improvement of the treatment of gender issues in Bangladesh's first PRSP, *Unlocking the Potential*.

⁵ As a whole, these kinds of sentiments are perhaps best captured by Goldenberg's (2008) recent insistence that grassroots women's leadership is critical to "the 'deepening' of democracy".

⁶ For Weber, these specifically exceptional powers or qualities "are as are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader" (p.344).

⁷ In addition to (a) 'the ability to lead' and (b) 'the act of leading', leadership can for example also be defined as (c) the function or position of a leader: *she managed to maintain her leadership of the party despite charges of corruption*, or (d) the leaders of a group: *the union leadership agreed to arbitrate*. Each of these definitions is based on those of the definition of leadership provided by Dictionary.com (2008).

⁸ Feelings of helplessness and worthlessness are well-recognized features of women's oppression. Parpart *et al* (2002), agreeing with Rowlands (1998), 'believe that empowerment must be understood as including both individual conscientization (*power within*) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to politicized power with others, which provides the power to bring about change' (p.4; brackets Parpart *et al*'s; italics mine).

⁹ More than that, a case can be made that in some instances women practicing purdah actually possess marked feelings of *power within* already. In 'Under Western Eyes', Chandra Mohanty (1988) describes how Iranian middle-class women veiled themselves during Iran's 1979 revolution to indicate solidarity with their working-class sisters. This very sort of strategic essentialism, Stephen Morton (2003) argues, "clearly challenges the common assumption that the veil is always a sign of women's oppression by repressive patriarchal Islamic laws" (p.75).

¹⁰ Bidi spoke with Radio Netherlands Worldwide (RNW) reporter, Eric Beauchemin. Her story was featured in RNW's "Microcredit – When Suicide Seems the Only Way Out", broadcast 31 Dec. 2009, and available on the World Wide Web at: <<http://www.rnw.nl/english/article/microcredit-when-suicide-seems-only-way-out>>. Last accessed Feb. 1, 2010.

¹¹ Suicide was indeed the cause of more than half of all unnatural deaths among women age 10 to 50 years from 1996 to 1997 (Yusuf *et al* 2000: 1221).

¹² The World Bank is the world's largest provider of international microcredit assistance to Bangladesh (World Bank: www.worldbank.org/bd)

¹³ In her study of *Shalish* and women's access to justice, Siddiqi (2004: 9) notes that Muslim women in rural Bangladesh frequently relinquish their rights to inheritance of property in exchange for 'social protection' from male relatives.

¹⁴ Fardah Khan explores the links between Bangladeshi women's increasing social and political visibility and escalating violence against women in Bangladesh in her article 'Gender Violence and Development Discourse in Bangladesh' (2005). Khan argues that current development policy in Bangladesh assumes increased welfare for women in the process of economic development when, in fact, women are subjected to new and intensified forms of violence during these changes in the economy and society.

¹⁵ The respective families of Zia and Hasina, it is worth noting, are historically powerful members of Bangladesh's elite class. More generally it points to gendered assumptions and practices as an important clue in the problem of why and how women's economic and political progress in other countries of the Global South, for example South Africa, is chronically impeded.

¹⁶ Dahlia Goldenberg (2008) reports on the consolidated efforts of the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International to help grassroots women's organisations in many countries of the Global South develop ongoing relationships with local government and achieve concrete improvements for their communities.

¹⁷ The 2003 Annual Conference of the GWLN culminated in the development of a 'GWLN Declaration'; presented to local governments in GWLN project areas (Nagorik Uddyog, 2003).

¹⁸ Concurrent to the GWLN, Nagorik Uddyog undertakes a programme entitled 'Improving Women's Access to Justice in Bangladesh', intended to transform *Shalish* into a more democratic mode of mediation. For a thorough review of this initiative, see Siddiqi's "Paving the Way to Justice: The Experience of Nagorik Uddyog" (2004).