Men as Partners of Positive Change: Masculinities and Women’s Access to Business Opportunities in Bangladesh
MEN AS PARTNERS OF POSITIVE CHANGE: 
MASCULINITIES AND WOMEN’S ACCESS TO BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES IN BANGLADESH 

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Abstract

Men can play effective role as partners of positive change in terms of women’s access to business opportunities and women empowerment in Bangladesh. This research paper intends to explore and understand how men as well as masculinities can contribute towards women’s access to business opportunities in Bangladesh. In fact, men’s engagement is very significant for meaningful and effective women empowerment. This study has used a mixed method approach of quantitative and qualitative methods with focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The study finds that there are a notable number of men in Bangladesh who have supported women empowerment in the context of gaining access to business entrepreneurship. The study presents that men can contribute in diminishing unequal power relations in terms of economic opportunities through gaining proper access to business opportunities. The study concludes that men can truly become active agents and partners of positive change for women’s empowerment through women’s access to business opportunities. The paper espouses that there is a potential scope for developing a model in order to bring the positive masculinities into action for women’s empowerment through access to business opportunities.

Key Words: Bangladesh, Business Opportunities, Masculinity, Women Empowerment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study is aimed at understanding how men as partners help women to get access to business opportunities in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Existing literature suggests that men’s engagement for women empowerment is very crucial. It can be said that in any patriarchal society men play the role of gate keepers for women’s
access to business opportunities. Therefore, without having an in-depth understanding on masculinities together with men’s perceptions, attitudes and practices with regard to women empowerment; it is not possible to explore how men can become active agents of change for women’s access to business opportunities. Understanding men’s gender requires considering masculinity construction as a multiple category. This also helps to find out appropriate strategies to include men as partners of positive change. In Bangladesh, as members of typical patriarchy most men tend to reproduce age old gender order through masculine practices. This causes deprivation of women from economic opportunities. However, there are some men, though few in number, who have supported the cause of women empowerment in the context of gaining access to business opportunities. A thorough understanding of the construction of masculinities of these men may help to resort ways to consider men as allies for the cause of women empowerment.

The changes in the social landscape in Bangladesh are very rapid and more evident in the gender arena. Although more women are now visible in the public domain and taking part in income generating activities, the number is still very low in comparison to men. Undoubtedly, women’s economic empowerment through access to business opportunities is essential for overall national development (BWCCI, 2008, p7). At a personal level, the right motivation is important for a female entrepreneur in making a decision to start up a new business enterprise (Jahed and Kulsum, 2011, p1). There are both push and pull factors which influence women’s decision to start a new business. Push factors are negative forces and may include examples of losing a job and not being able to fulfill aspirations in the work place. On the contrary, pull factors are positive forces and may include examples of achieving personal dreams and economic empowerment. Women are almost 50 percent of Bangladesh’s total population (BBS, 2018). Unfortunately, women constitute only 1 percent of formal business entrepreneurship in Bangladesh (BWCCI, 2008, p10). But this situation in Bangladesh is slowly changing. The change might escalate in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh if the male family members start to play positive role as partners of change.

Active support from men in the family and society can contribute substantially to materialize women entrepreneurship. As a pull factor, men can accelerate the pace of creating a harmonious environment for women in the family and society to own business entrepreneurship. The encouraging trend is that women are increasingly endeavoring for business entrepreneurship. So, there is a potential scope to develop a model to bring positive masculinities into action for women’s empowerment through access to business opportunities considering men as partner of change. However, though we now have some idea about how construction of masculinities is linked with enactment of violence, there is no literature that extensively focused on the link between constructions of masculinities with women’s participation in economic opportunities, especially in market opportunities.
In any patriarchal society it is understandable that the attributes of the construction of hegemonic masculinities would create obstacles for women to participate in market opportunities. Because through this, men ensure control over women that in turn reproduce patriarchal domination. In those societies where masculinity is linked to dominance or toughness, male entitlement or ownership of women, and approval of the physical chastisement of women, the rate of Violence Against Women (VAW) is very high. Therefore, it is easy to understand in a patriarchal society why most men enact behavior or practices that ensure exclusion of women from different levels of decision making and economic opportunities, entrepreneurship, high levels of societal tolerance of domestic violence against women and lack of supportive practices. However, what is very important to answer is why some men help women to get access to economic and market opportunities going against the societal prescription. As these societal or cultural practices are also linked with the enactment of masculinities in any given cultural context, it is very important to understand this in order develop strategies which involve all men and reduce the negative behavior. Within this broader context this paper unfolds the construction of masculinities of those men who played positive role in supporting their spouses, child, female relatives or neighbors to get access to market opportunities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Women’s economic empowerment is an integral part of the entire national development (BWCCI, 2008) and definitely crucial for all (Jahed and Kulsum, 2011). In terms of number, women are almost half of the total population of Bangladesh. But very few women are there in the formal business entreprenuerships in Bangladesh. Typically, socio-economic aspects and factors had not been in favor of women micro entrepreneurs in Bangladesh (Nasima and Alam, 2014). Generally, women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh have to face numerous challenges from their family and society (Afroze, 2014). Although, there are many opportunities now-a-days that encourage women in Bangladesh to become business entrepreneurs (Chowdhury, 2017), women yet to materialize those opportunities. However, some have observed that women in Bangladesh are increasingly entering into business entrepreneurship (Ahmed, 2018) and women’s access to business opportunities is increasing over the recent years (Bangladesh Bank, 2018). Nevertheless, there is a no reliable data on the recent success of women in entrepreneurship. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh women need support from the gatekeepers to change the situation quickly, and some have observed that family and society is playing a positive role in this regard (Hossain, 2017).

Undoubtedly, male members of the family can help women overcome the hurdles in women’s access to business entrepreneurship and economic development in any patriarchal society if they really want change to happen. Although it was difficult to
get any literature on men’s positive role in promoting women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh and abroad, existing literature on construction of masculinities can be very helpful in exploring the possibilities for men to become a change agent. In simple conceptualization, masculinities refer to a set of attributes and characteristics of manhood. Men are accustomed to show off manhood and masculinities. Although usually masculinity is considered as a unitary concept, due to the recent development in the theory of post-structuralism in the social sciences masculinity is now considered as a plural term (Kimmel, 1994, pp. 124-126). Masculinity is now considered as ‘more than individual characteristics that are constructed, defined, and maintained in discourse and culture and sustained by institutional practices’ (Connell, 2000, p. 15). There are ‘hegemonic’ and ‘marginal’ forms of masculinity that are very closely linked with power dynamics. Connell argues there are different constructions of masculinities i.e. hegemonic masculinity and marginal masculinities.

Carrigan, Connell, and Lee in an article entitled Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity (1985) introducing the concept of hegemonic masculinity argued that the dominant interpretations are embedded in and sustained by male dominated social institutions. Such institutions include the state, education, corporations, and the family. The use of the concept like ‘hegemonic masculinity’ helped them to connect institutional aspects of male power with the collective practices of men. The importance of introducing this new concept and approach to understand masculinities lie in the fact that it enabled a researcher to focus on socially constructed differences between men. Understanding the socially constructed differences among men also help to shed light on how particular form of masculinity can be constructed as hegemonic.1 The importance of this theoretical position for this paper lies in the fact that identification of the hegemonic construction of masculinities allows to focus light on other forms that do not conform to the dominant constructions. For example, those men who support women’s participation of business opportunities surely enact masculinities that are different from the harmonic masculinities.

It is also expected that insights on these different practices and relevant discourses would help to locate available constructions of masculinities at the community level. Once we get insights on different versions of masculinities available at the community level we would be able to unfold how certain forms are reproduced in institutional practices through politics and development processes, while other forms become marginalized. Thus, this theoretical framework will show the flexibilities and operational mechanisms of available versions of masculinities in every day practices, and how certain forms of masculinities become dominant in relation to various ‘subordinate masculinities’ at the community level and reproduce patriarchy.2

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2. See Chapter Four of Mirza, S.S. 2012 (Young Men in a Colorful City: Masculinity, Young Men’s Sexual Practices, and HIV/AIDS in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Unpublished manuscript from the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) for a detailed discussion.
There are many explanations of why man do not support women’s participation in economic opportunities. One of the very common explanation is to link this tendency with men’s crisis. A study on the construction of masculinities among young Bangladeshi men suggests that men in general are facing such crisis with regard to the empowerment of women and their subsequent achievements. But when some are working with women in supportive roles to get access to market opportunities, undoubtedly shedding light on masculinities as a plural concept would help to unfold men’s gender construction from a different perspective and would also help to suggest ways to initiate changes in the larger society.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study had used a mixed method approach to collect data from three districts—Kishoregonj, Netrokona and Sunamgonj. In Kishoreganj district, the study was conducted in Kadamajhati, Gunodhor and Udighi villages under the Gunodhor Union. In Netrokona district, the study was conducted in Manarkandi, Pirerchar and Borobathan villages under the Maghan Siadhar Union of Mohonganj Upazilla. In Sunamganj district, the study was conducted in Derai Upazila’s Badalpur village under Karimpur Union, Hajaripur village under Derai Sarmangal Union and Buranpur village under Taral Union.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Case Study methods were used to collect qualitative data. At first 27 FGDs and 27 IDIs were conducted among randomly selected respondents. An almost equal number of respondents were selected from each of the districts while a balance was maintained in identifying male and female respondents. A number of couples were randomly chosen for FGDs and KIIIs during the PRA sessions. FGDs were conducted in two different groups: one with women who were beneficiaries of the project and another with randomly chosen men of the village. The rationale of conducting FGDs with men in general was to understand the existing general practices of men at the household level in relation to the use and control of resources, choices regarding family welfare, women’s mobility and access to services. Men’s account of their general practices was validated against women beneficiaries’ responses to identified changes. While selecting the key informants, a balance was maintained between the project beneficiaries (who were already identified by the project staffs as positive men) and ‘non-beneficiary ordinary men’. Whenever and wherever possible, these men’s wives were also interviewed for triangulation.

The main objective of conducting FGDs with particularly men was to explore the existing common practices of men at the family regarding women’s access to and

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control of resources. Men’s description of their common practices in the family was validated against women’s narration and responses. Besides, the IDIs were conducted with the relevant respondents to locate the change and identify positive case studies. Then, data were analyzed and presented in a narrative form. Ten case studies were explored using IDIs. In this paper, four selected case studies have been mentioned to clarify and understand how positive masculinities work for women’s economic development and empowerment through women’s access to business ownership. It should be noted here while selecting the cases, district representation was not considered rather the merit of the cases with regard to the study objectives was emphasized.

The quantitative data had been collected in the second phase using a survey questionnaire from 900 randomly selected men and women who were part of the CARE Bangladesh intervention. An almost equal number of respondents were selected from each of the three districts. Respondents were selected from different age groups. A small number of respondents were below the age of 20. 21.2% of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 30. 27.2% respondents belonged to the age group 30-40. 25.1% respondents belonged to the age group 40-50 and 23.4% were over 50 years old. Female and male respondents were almost equally distributed. Most of the respondents (55%) did not have any education. 27.8% went to school but only 8.3% completed primary level education. Only 0.7% completed higher secondary and 0.2% had a higher education. Most of the respondents were Muslims (80%), but there were people of other religions too. Respondents were selected from different income groups. 9.2% respondents earned below 1,000 taka monthly, 14.9% respondents earned 5001-7000 taka monthly, and 4.6% earned more than 10,000 taka per month. The main purpose of the survey was to understand the general pattern of men’s perception, attitude and practice with regard to enactment of masculinity and women empowerment issues. The analysis of the quantitative data was done by a trained statistician using SPSS, whereas the qualitative data was analyzed simultaneously when the data was gathered. The qualitative data was content analyzed, indexed/coded into various categories in order to find commonalities, differences and patterns. For this a ‘grounded’ approach was used, which was originally advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In this approach, data is not pre-coded until collection to find out how it functions or nests in its context, and to determine how many varieties of it there are.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this study have been presented in three different sections. In the first section, the discourses available on masculinities in the study area have been discussed. In the second section we have presented the key findings of the quantitative survey to understand the hegemonic construction of masculinities. Here,
we have also presented qualitative data to supplement the quantitative findings. In the next section we have presented four cases studies based on the findings of the qualitative enquiry. We expect these three sections will help us to analyze why and how some men could escape the dominant prescriptions of hegemonic masculinities.

4.1 Different Forms of Masculinities

In the study area there are at least three different discursive models of masculinities i.e. the Singho rasher purush (Leo men) or Asol Purush (Real Men), Valomanush (Good Man) and the Sadharon purush (Ordinary man). Among these models the ‘Leo Man’ (Singho rasher purush) represents the hegemonic masculinity model. Because it dominates the ideals, desires and fantasies of the majority of the men. The ‘Good Man’ (Valomanush) model represents the subordinated masculinity. Because the characteristics of this model conflicts with the Leo men model. This is also quite oppositional to the ‘Leo Men’. Although majority men praise the “Good Man” model they don’t want to follow this model. They think it is not practical to follow this. Rather most of these men enact a different model of masculinity i.e. the Sadharonpurush (Ordinary men) model which conform to the hegemonic model ‘the Leo men (Singho rasher purush)’ but can’t embody all the characteristics of this model. Moreover, the people who enact this model also felt marginalized by the upper class people. Therefore, this model represents the complicit or marginalized masculinity. In this paper we have focused only on unfolding the perceptions, attitudes and practices of the ordinary men with regard to women’s participation and control of income, decision making, control over resources and mobility. It is expected that this will help to understand the case studies of positive practices of men who hasn’t follow the traditional prescriptions and help women to access business opportunities.

4.2 Attributes of Hegemonic Masculinities

In order to understand the traditional practices of men with regard to helping women getting access to business opportunities both the qualitative data collection and quantitative survey focused on four different aspects of women’s right. These are decision making in the family and household, participation in income generating activities, access and control over resources and women’s mobility. It should be noted here that these areas were identified by women during the first phase as pre-condition for being able to access business opportunities.

4.2.1 Decision Making in the Family and Household

With regard to the decision making in the family and household, men’s perception points towards men’s superiority over women. During the FGDs, men opined that they think men have the right to dominate and control the family decisions. As they place men over women, they think, it is men who should think about the status and
welfare of the households. As women are not the descendants of the husbands’ lineage, they should not say anything about the welfare of the family. Therefore, men should play the principal role in maintaining the household income and making other important decisions in buying, selling or mortgaging land, selling of cattle. Women, during FGDs, also reinforced men’s perception. For example a female respondent from Urdighi village stated:

“...A man should maintain his family perfectly; as he is the head of family so he should hold all the responsibilities as well...”

(Name: Taslima, age: 29, village: Urdighi, Union: Gunodhor, Upazilla: Karimganj, District: Kishoreganj)

However, the study team did find some men who think there should be a mutual understanding between husband and wife to take decisions together. They believe wives can also contribute towards decisions about family income, property, children’s education and other family welfare issues.

Quantitative data shows that men’s perception towards decision making in the family and household undermines women’s contribution and do not recognize them as important factors in the decision making process. 88% of the male respondents think it is men who make the important decisions within the family.

4.2.2 Women’s Participation in income generating activities

Male respondents in this study do not consider women’s participation in income generating activities outside of domestic domain as a desirable option, though they showed positive attitudes towards such activities. Their unwillingness towards women’s participation in IGA outside home derived out of the fact that they think it hampers a man’s prestige as others would criticize him for not being able to provide food and clothing to his family. Such participation in income generative activities in the studied areas by women is not a very old phenomenon. CARE is one of the very few NGOs who have started to work with poor women in this area. Though initially there were strong objections against women participation in such activities going out of the household, the situation improved a lot due to the hard work done by the NGOs and also the contribution of women in household maintenance and income generation. However, we found that though men have now-a-days accepted such participations; they still think that women should concentrate on their household responsibilities first, while men should oversee the outer world and earn money. Almost all men, with very few exceptions, think that women’s income should also be controlled by their male counterparts or should be spent for the family’s welfare. Women’s opinion in this regard is nothing different than that of men. For example a female respondent from Urdighi village opined:
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“Mainly the man earns for the family...so he keeps control of all the maintenances and expenses...”

(Name: Tahmina, age: 35, village: Urdighi, Union: Gunodhor, Upazilla: Karimganj, District: Kishoreganj)

Poor women’s husbands consider their wives work as helping aid/domestic labour in other’s household as humiliating and degrading for the family status. Even in hardship, men mostly did not think their wives or daughters should work in other’s household. Therefore, they prefer NGO or Government jobs/works during hardship. The Ultra poor women who are forced to work for their family needs are not even expected to work outside as there remain chances of sexual harassment and negative attitude from the neighbors. A male respondent from Badalpur village opined:

“I support girl’s education... girls can do anything after completing their studies, it is permitted... but I will starve... will die but never let my daughters to do any odd jobs or laborious work... it is matter of honour...”

(Name: Akmol, age: 65, village: Badalpur, Union: Karimpur, Upazilla: Derai, District: Sunamgan)

The quantitative survey suggests that 70% of the maleresspondents think women should not be involved in outside jobs or business.

4.2.3 Access and Control over resources

Men’s perception with regard to access and control over resources reinforces male superiority over female. Men in the study area think that wives should have less control over resources and households should be maintained by the earnings of the husbands only. They consider works related with control over resources and households as exclusively men’s domain because women naturally understand less than their male counterparts in any respect. To most of them, important economic resources in the hands of women are not safe because women are not strong enough to safeguard such resources. Moreover, they think if women have exclusive control over important economic resources they do not obey their husbands. Though women have in general opposed such perceptions, they have overtly emphasized men’s role as the breadwinner in the family. For example, one of our female respondents from Borobathan village in a FGD stated:

“The man earns for the family... he is the family head... so he holds all rights of property and all important property belongs to him”

(Name: Beauty, age: 30, village: Borobathan, Union: Maghan Siadar, Upazilla: Mohanganj, District: Netrokona)

With regard to daughter’s right over property we see a difference of opinion among the Hindu and Muslims. The majority of the Hindu men said that they do not think
daughters should have rights over their parent’s property, though the Muslim men consider daughter’s right over parent’s property as an important issue. During the FGDs and in-depth interviews with women we have found similar opinions. For example, a female respondent from Hajaripur village opined:

“We (Hindu daughters) never get anything from our father’s side after marriage...whatever we get is only through dowry...”

(Name: Lokkhi Rani, age: 45, village: Hajaripur, Union: Derai Sarmangal, Upazilla: Derai, District: Sunamganj)

However, in case of Muslims, majority of the men think such rights are always limited to the brother’s entitlement whereas the majority of the women think women should not practice such rights as it might create trouble in their relationship with their brothers. Almost all the men said that they would ‘give the property’ if their sisters wanted their share. This indicates that there exists very little willingness among men to ensure that their sisters practice their inheritance rights.

4.2.4 Women’s mobility

Ordinary Men’s perception with regard to women’s mobility points towards men anxiety about controlling women sexuality. It seemed that most men belonging to the extreme poor category only ‘allowed their wives’ to go outside as they had no other alternatives. Most men, irrespective of religion, think women’s mobility in the public sphere should be restricted to the domestic domain and public places should be dominated by males. They think that, only if there is no alternative for a woman, she should go out. To them, visibility of women in the public sphere without being properly covered with a veil may provoke young men into harassing them sexually. Husbands said that they do not want to see their wives go out and talk with other people because it creates tension in them. They think all human beings are attracted to the opposite sex. So, their wives may be derailed if they talk with other men. Moreover, if other men see their wives in public places, it will be a sin for them. If women are bound to go, they must wear borka or veils so that the outsider men will not pay attention to their bodies. Men in general, perceive women’s purity in relation to their family honor. The prime duty of a man is to protect such honor. Many consider a family’s honor may be threatened if a woman goes out in public and becomes a victim of harassment. Quite surprisingly, during the FGD sessions we have found most women expressing the same view. For example, a female respondent who goes outside of their house for work (market; educational institution etc.) and other purposes mentioned:

“Purdah is important... wherever we go, we cover our heads and nobody gets a chance to look at us...”

(Quoted from FGD and KII from our study area)
A male respondent from Borobathan village, Netrokona said,

“Women should use a veil as it is the rule of Islam…and it saves them from evil and sins…”

(Name: Karim, age: 40, village: Borobathan, Union: Maghan Siadar, Upazilla: Mohanganj, District: Netrokona)

There are a few men who think the situation is changing and now-a-days, if required, women could also go to medicine shops or to visit the doctor. Many men also said during the FGDs that for a number of purposes women may also go to the Union Parisad office. However, the majority opined that if they had an alternative they would not have allowed their women to go there. A woman going to a local bazaar (market) is completely unacceptable to men though many men said women may go to big market if they need to shop for their children or buy clothes and other necessary things for themselves. A male respondent from Kadimajhati village, Kishoreganj stated,

“New brides and young women are not allowed to go outside the home…but children and old women can easily go outside…it is an issue of family honor…prestige…”

(Name: Aklimar, age: 38, village: Kadimajhati, Union: Gunodhors, Upazilla: Karimganj, District: Kishoreganj)

During FGDs most women opined that they do not like to go to public places like ‘Union Parisad’ or ‘Bazaar’ as those places belong to men in general, but they have to go as they need to go to different offices (i.e. VGD cards, relief etc.) with regard to receiving different Governmental and NGO benefits (i.e. attending CARE meetings/workshops). They also said that if their husbands would have earned enough, they would not have participated in such programs as they feel that their husbands do not like such participation. We found some women of younger age who differed with such general perception and suggested that now-a-days women should take responsibility of many of the works outside home (for example going to schools for children’s education, hospitals, clinics etc.). However, the quantitative survey echoed the traditional perception of men as majority of the men suggested women should not have outside jobs or business. 70.8% of the male respondents told that they wouldn’t allow or advise anyone to allow women to have outside jobs or business.

4.3 Men as Partners of Positive Change: Four Case Studies

Discussion from the above section clearly suggests that in the study area traditional masculine practice do not support women’s participation in business opportunities as long as it is outside home. This section discusses four case studies of men who have helped their partners to get access to business opportunities. It should be noted here
that all these men belong to the category of ‘Sadharon Purush’ (Ordinary Men) and therefore tend to enact the hegemonic construction of masculinities. However, as we will see in the case studies below and discussion section, these men could undermine the prescriptions of hegemonic masculinities for several reasons adopting different strategies. In the first case study we have discussed Fakrul’s story who has helped Dina (Fakrul’s wife) to set up her own business of cloths. The second case is about Alam who helped her wife Heramoni to set up a small cattle raising firm. Although Alam has other business he helped her wife run the business with the help of a NGO. The third case describes the story of Bijoy who helped her wife Pretii to set up a grocery shop in the village. The fourth case narrated Saifur’s story who helped his second wife Sahina to set up a shop in the local market.

**Case study 1: Fakrul helped Dina in her business initiative**

Dina was the eldest child in her family, with one brother and two sisters. Suddenly, she was married off at the age of 14, although she intended to continue her studies. She was a student of class nine during her marriage. Because she was a beautiful girl and there were security threats, her parents wanted to solve the vulnerability of unmarried Dina through an early age marriage. While marrying off her daughter Dina’s husband requested Fakrul’s father to allow her daughter to continue study. He uttered that as he knew Fakrul’s father a ‘Valo Manush’ he would request him to allow her daughter to continue study. Dina’s husband Fakrul Hasan, was a businessman at Karimganj, Kishoreganj. After the marriage he helped Dina to continue her study. But initially he was very reluctant. Dina could manage her arguing that if a girl wants to have ‘bad relation’ she could easily do that even staying at home. No girl needs to go to school or collages for such bad intention. At some point Dina also requested her father-in-law for permission. Her father-in-law ordered Fakrul to help Dina in continuing her education. With her determination and encouragement from her husband and in-laws, Dina ultimately scored a brilliant result in the higher secondary examination.

Both Fakrul and his father observe many female government officers to come to their shop alone for buying cloths. Looking at them they also thought that as Dina is a good student she might also be a Government Officer and if this comes true the honor and power of their family will increase. So, when Dina wanted to continue higher studies, her husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law continued their support for her study at bachelor level. At that time Dina had a four-year-old baby. Her mother-in-law took care of the baby during her absence due to study and academic schedules while her husband used to take her to the collage and bring her back. Dina’s husband and father-in-law encouraged her to sit for civil service recruitment examination. She did not get
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The main objective of conducting FGDs with particularly men was to explore the changes. While selecting the key informants, a balance was maintained between the quantitative survey focused on four different aspects of women’s right. These are quantitative and qualitative data, which is not only helpful in understanding the nature of masculinity, but also to understand the women’s role. The study indicates that men, who are involved in the work or business, help their wives in various ways. One of the most significant ways is through financial support. However, some men also support their wives in other ways, such as helping them to take care of the family or providing emotional support. In this way, men can contribute towards women’s access to business opportunities and women empowerment in Bangladesh. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies, such as the BWCCI (2008) which suggests that 70% of the male respondents think women should have exclusive control over resources.

Acknowledgement:

In any patriarchal society it is understandable that the attributes of the construction of masculinities can contribute towards women’s access to business opportunities and women empowerment. However, there are also many positive examples of men who are playing a positive role as partners of change. One of the case studies presented in this study is that of Alam, who helped his wife Hiramoni to set up a duck raising firm.

Case study 2: Alam helped her wife Hiramoni to set up a duck raising firm

Alam (30) is the eldest among three brothers and two sisters from a relatively well-off family from Perichor, Netrokona. He was married six years ago when his wife Hiramoni was a student of class seven. Alam’s father sold some land. Alam went to Dubai (middle east). When Alam was in Dubai, his wife Hiramoni wanted to continue her study while she was staying in Alam’s father’s house. Alam didn’t disagree. Hiramoni continued her studies and passed her SSC and HSC examinations. While staying in Dubai Alam looking at her surroundings realized that a society can only prosper if both men and women work together. Therefore, he encouraged and supported his wife to continue her education.

Alam understood that if his wife got a good job she could contribute to the family income. He wanted to establish an example in his village also. In fact, Alam’s parents were initially reluctant towards Hiramoni’s education. But, with Alam’s support it was finally manageable for her to continue her studies. Alam said he primarily supported his wife for education as he saw many educated women in Dubai who were involved in jobs. Subsequently, with the help of a NGO Heramoni got required training and later Alam helped her wife to set up a small duck raising business. Her wife got the funding from a NGO and partially from Alam. Hiramoi look after the business full time while Alam helps her whenever needed. Alam accompany Heramoni if she requires going to different places for the NGO activities. Both of their kids are studying and they believe they would be able to send them to good educational institution for higher studies.

Alam is very confident about his wife’s dealing with different people whom his wife deals for different purposes. His wife always tells him whatever happens in her everyday interaction and seeks suggestion from him. Alam has seen that his wife always follows her suggestion and if she disagrees she tells that to Alam and they both decide the way to move forward. Therefore, Alam never had any distrust on his wife with regard to relationship.
Case study 3: Bijoy helped her wife Preeti to set up a grocery shop

Bijoy (40) was a tailor and works in the Kadimajhati village market of Karimganj, Kishoreganj. In the past he used to work in Dhaka at a Tailor shop. His wife Preeti was running a grocery shop. In family he has mother, wife and six-year-old son. He lost his father and elder sister at a very young age. He has always supportive to Preeti to do be engaged in income generating activities. He inspired her continuously. He knew if Preeti could bring in some economic benefits that would ensure their better future. His neighbors were criticizing him but he remained patient. He believed that those who never let their wives go outside or create obstacles for them from getting jobs are ‘bad people’ as they do not trust their wives. Preeti, from the very beginning of their marriage, also wanted to do something to contribute to their family. Bijoy encouragement helped her to look for opportunities to set up business. When Priti got the opportunity to get financial help from a NGO, Bijoy helped her to set up a grocery shop. Preeti said that Bijoy had always supported her to carry forward her business. Whenever or wherever she needed to go for her business Bijoy supported her and accompanied her. Bijoy also took the responsibility to buy goods from the big market for Preetis shop.

Bijoy thought that trust is the most important issue in conjugal life. He also said he was like ‘sdharonpurush’ (ordinary man) but he started to think differently when he met a woman in his tailor shop in Dhaka. This woman used to work in an office and her husband was an engineer. Bijoy found them to be a very happy couple. He had discussions with that woman on many occasions and came to know that she contributed to her family and her husband supported her a lot to carry forward her job. Bijoy wanted to have a good happy family like them. He wanted to be a good husband. Preeti on the other hand always paid special attention to inform Bijoy about her daily interaction with different people so that Bijoy could never distrust her. Whenever there is anything that Priti didn’t like about a male customer Priti inform it to Bijoy and seek his help to handle the issue.

Case study 4: Saifur Rashid helped his wife Safina to set up a shop in the local market and buy a land of her own

Saifur Rashid (38) runs a poultry shop in Marichkhali bazaar, Karimganj, Kishorgonj. He read up to class five. He has two wives. He has two sons and four daughters with his first wife. On the other hand, he has one son and three daughters with the second wife. His second wife, Shahina (37) is the owner of two katha (3.3 decimals) of land in the local market. She also has a grocery shop beside her husband’s poultry shop. Saifur helped his second wife to start
the rented grocery shop and buy two katha of land in the market. He married his second wife five years ago. Prior to marrying Saifur, Shafina had had two daughters and one son from a previous marriage. Now Saifur and Shafina also have one daughter.

Saifur had a good relation with Shafina before marrying her. Shafina’s former husband was suspicious about their relationship and there was a rumour in the village about this relationship. Paying attention to the rumours, Shahina’s first husband divorced her. The villagers then put a huge amount of pressure on Saifur to marry Shahina as people thought her marriage had failed due to him. He finally agreed to marry her. Now the first wife lives in his home with her children and the second wife in a rented house with her children.

His first wife is not engaged in any income generating activity and stays at his village home and looks after the household. After marriage, when Shafina received help from local organization she expressed her willingness to Saifur to start a chicken selling shop just beside Saifur’s shop. Saifur agreed, thinking that her earnings can be spent for his newly established household and if needed, he can take help from her.

With the help of a NGO they started a shop. When they were trying to start the shop many people including the chairman and the leader of the local market committee did not give permission. Many of Saifur’s friends also told him not to do this. Shafina and Saifur then tried to convince the leaders, explaining how unmanageable this is for Saifur to maintain two households and feed ten children. Shafina also committed to be respectful of social issues and to work under the guardianship of her husband. Moreover, she would always maintain purdah (veil) to conform to the local customs. By giving a commitment not to do anything against social norms and with the help of a NGO and her husband she convinced the market committee. Saifur took the responsibility to buy chickens from different vendors while Safina looked after both of the shops when he was absent.

A number of overarching attributes of the construction of masculinities are found from the aforementioned case studies. The first attribute is the self-reflexivity of the male gatekeepers. The self-reflection primarily originated from their desire to go up in the gender order considering their partners or female family members as ally and partner in this regard. Three strategies are found from the male family members who helped female family members in accessing business opportunities. The first one is to gain prestige by achieving the image of a good man type construction of masculinities. The second one is to improve economic condition of the household. The third strategy is to improve the educational status of their spouses and daughter-in-laws. All of the aforesaid case studies exhibit at least one of the mentioned trends. Such self-reflexivity
originated from these men’s exposure to alternative positive social practices with regard to women’s mobility and participation in income generating activities. In the following paragraphs it has been elaborated how in the above mentioned cases the male members have embodied the above attributes.

In the first case study, Dina who was married at a very early age to Fakrul who is from a middle class joint family where Dina’s father-in-law was the main decision maker in the family. Dina’s father-in-law primarily supported her because of being critical of his traditional masculine pride as he wanted to keep his promise to let Dina do her study as a real man. Through this he also ensured his prestige and authority in Dina’s family. Moreover, discourse of good man as a construction of masculinity was also a very vital point. He felt more responsible when he found Dina working hard and doing well in examinations conforming to all of the societal norms. As a father he wanted to ensure justice in his household and thus ordered his son to help Dina to continue her study. His tendency has been reflected as an initiative to reproduce hegemonic masculinity because he wanted to maintain order in his household and used force to ensure justice. As Dina’s father-in-law did not have any daughter, he felt a fatherly emotion to allow Dina and provided her with the required initial business capital. Undoubtedly, it is the exposure of Fakrul and his father to the outer world and the celebration of alternative masculine practice that helped them to continue the supportive role. They realized that Dina might also enhance their social status while contributing economically and that this might help them to be more powerful in the community.

In the second case study, Alam had his own self-reflexive understandings regarding gender equity. When Alam observed how women and men work together in Dubai, a Muslim society like Bangladesh, he started questioning his age old ideas about women’s work and visibility in the public space. Alam said he had a very different perception about Dubai as a closed society before he went there. But his real life experience gave him a different realization which helped him to negotiate traditional masculinity of Ordinary man type and act differently. Alam was not a good student as he could not even pass the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination. He was also teased by his friends due to such failure. But he always wanted to gain honour and prestige in the society. His experience in Dubai gave him a way to become an example in society by allowing and inspiring his wife to continue her study and set up her own business. Also, Alam has a very calculative intention of getting economic benefit behind such alternative masculine practice through which he wants to strengthen his position in the society. Alam realized that earning alone by a man is not enough now-a-days. He said that those families are doing better where both husband and wife are involved in economic activities.
In the third case study, Bijoy’s self-reflexivity primarily devised when he was working as a tailor in Dhaka. At that time, he had opportunities to meet with women who were working and earning for their family. He used to listen to the conversation of the couples who were coming to his shop. He realized that those families are doing better where both husband and wife are earning and have good relationship. Therefore, he encouraged Preeti to think of setting up of her own business as this can contribute to their family’s well-being.

In the fourth case study, Saifur’s economic condition forced his wife Sahina to set up her own business initiative. Saifur helped Sahina to set up a small shop. He thought if Sahina could run the business she might also help him if he is in crisis. Saifur got the idea to involve her wife in the business looking at women coming from different NGOs to their locality and realized that Sahina could also run the business.

A very important attribute of the construction of masculinities of these supportive men is to take responsibility to negotiate the dominant prescriptions of the hegemonic masculinity with regard to women’s mobility. In all of the aforementioned case studies, the male members took the responsibility to help the female family members with regard to mobility. In the first case study, Fakrul took her wife to college and to the business place. In the second case study, Alam helped her wife to get access to the NGO by accompanying her whenever needed. In the third case study, Bijoy helped Preeti to buy goods from the big markets for her shop. In the fourth case study, Saifur helped his wife Sahina to set up a shop and took the responsibility to take her to the business destinations which are located far away.

One other important attribute of the construction of masculinities is the way these men deal with their masculinity crisis with regard to women’s exposure to the outer world and access and control over resources. In all of the aforesaid case studies it has been found that even though women were having their own business, men were some how confirmed that they would get economic support if they require. Never the less, this tendency means to conform to the dominant attribute of the masculinity with regard to not allowing women to have control over resources. On the other hand, women also practiced their agency in a way that could ensure to their male family members that they would conform to the social norms as a wife. For example, as Dina could fulfill all of the required conditions to be an obedient daughter-in-law, Dina’s father-in-law gave her permission to set up a business. At least three interrelated factors helped Dina’s husband Fakrul to overcome his masculinity crisis. The first one is Dina’s practice of agency to address the crisis. The second one is Fakrul’s father’s involvement as the acceptable supreme authority of the family. The third one is the celebration of alternative masculine practices in the community. Initially Fakrul was not fully convinced about Dina’s study but Dina tried to address that crisis. Dina convinced Fakrul with her well framed arguments to get initial
permission. Dina then tried to increase Fakrul’s confidence in her. And, finally, she convinced her husband with her hard work and brilliant results in the examinations. This process of building trust made it very easy for her to get permission to set up her own business. In the second case study Alam’s wife Hiramony also confirmed her husband’s trust on her. She maintained a good relationship with Alam and informed him about every interaction and asked for his suggestions. In the third case study, Preeti confirmed that she always put special attention to Bijoy and shared all of the daily experiences. In the last case study, Sahina conducted her business activities with close cooperation from her husband Saifur.

Another attribute of the construction of masculinity of these men is linked with their interest to invest in women’s business opportunity only when there is an external support or opportunities. Except the first one in all other cases men invest when there was an additional investment from the NGOs. This can be explained together with all these men’s interest to go up in the gender order. Even though they want to achieve higher status, the cost to invest on women’s business opportunity does not allow them to do so. But when an external agency comes up with business proposals to help women with a good amount of capital, they also took the opportunity. For example, in the second case study, even though Preeti, from the very beginning of their marriage, wanted to do something to contribute to their family, her husband Bijoy only became interested when she got financial help from a NGO. Same pattern is visible in all other case studies.

5. CONCLUSION

Findings of this paper suggest, it becomes lot easier for women to materialize business opportunities when they get support from their male family members. An exploration to the empirical experiences of women who have got support from their male family members could undoubtedly help in locating a wave of change for undermining patriarchy as well as hegemonic masculinity to involve men as partner of change. This study has found that men became interested in change since they found a viable way to gain honor and prestige along with becoming powerful in the society. So, motivation with meaningful and viable alternatives might establish a model for men to be inspired in order to become partners in women’s empowerment. A sophisticated model can be developed further to bring the positive masculinities into action for women’s empowerment through access to business opportunities.

Based on the findings of this study some steps can be suggested to involve men as partners of positive change in terms of women’s access to business entrepreneurship and business opportunities.

**Identification of particular practice-based model:** The role models should be identified based on specific practices. To elaborate, men who have cooperated
women in developing and gaining business entrepreneurship should be identified, acknowledged, recognized and highlighted as exemplary role models in women’s empowerment.

**Endorsement of the role model by women:** Endorsement of the exemplary men in the society might ramify numerous positive influences. In the long run, that will amplify and accelerate the participation of men as partners and agents in women’s empowerment. So, endorsement of the role model by women might definitely contribute to women’s access to business opportunities and business entrepreneurship.

**Celebration of the selected model’s practices in the community:** The role model’s practices can contribute a lot. For that purpose, men can be invited in small groups to discuss with the role models or a facilitator can use the story of the role model to initiate discussion among men on certain issues. The objective should be to initiate self-reflection among men.

**Using fatherhood for positive changes:** Every father wants his daughter to make success stories in her life. But still it is men who are engaged in negative practices like early marriage and hindering women’s empowerment in different forms. Specific community dialogue tools can be developed based on real life examples to initiate discussions among men so that they do not continue such practices.

**Celebration of alternative options to get honor and power:** Alternative ways to become powerful and gain social honor and prestige should be identified and celebrated. For example, the story of a father whose daughter has become successful in gaining business profit or job or another good way towards prestige and empowerment in their communities might be celebrated. This might help men to be more aware of their daughter’s potentials.

**Creation of awareness to address masculinity crisis:** In fact, women’s entry into the work force and public domain is not a recent phenomenon. However, all men are not used to it. Therefore, it is not unexpected that almost all of them face crisis of masculinity with regard to their wives’ or daughters’ access to the public sphere. If women pay proper attention to such crisis and try to build confidence among men, then men gradually might become more helpful towards women. There should be special sessions where successful women role models, who gained success in earning, might share their experiences.
REFERENCES


