PROJECTS AT THE PATHWAYS OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT RESEARCH PROGRAMME, BDI

Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Research Programme of the BRAC Development Institute (BDI) is an international Research Programme Consortium made up of activists and academics who explore and seek to bring about positive change in women’s everyday lives. It involves research institutions located in universities in Ghana, Brazil, Egypt and IDS, Sussex as well as UNIFEM. The Programme is funded primarily by the UK’s Department for International Development.

The Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Programme focuses on the following areas for enquiry:

- *Locate empowerment in women’s everyday lives*, applying a range of methodological and analytical strategies to gain a better understanding of how positive change happens in women’s lives.
- *Policy processes*, trace the processes that seek to promote women’s empowerment in order to understand the enabling conditions, strategies and tactics for achieving policy change.
- *Strategies for change*, seeking to reveal the factors for success and asking what works and what is specific to particular contexts, and what more generic lessons can be drawn.

The Pathways researches use the entry points of voice, work and body to determine the conditions that allow women to challenge inequality and identify and make visible hidden processes of change in each country. The objective is to make these pathways visible in order to bring about radical shifts in policy and practice that can build on these revealed successes.

The research projects at Pathways address the following four themes:

A. Conceptualising Empowerment
B. Changing Narratives of Sexuality
C. Building Constituencies for Gender Justice
D. Empowering Work

A. The theme **CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT** investigates conceptions of empowerment and change, encompassing substantive empirical as well as conceptual work on measuring empowerment and change in women’s lives and contextualising meanings and practices of empowerment in our different regions. The research projects conducted under this theme seeks to portray the lived realities and struggles of ordinary women and the different discourses of empowerment prevalent in national arena:
i) **National Discourses on Women's Empowerment: Enabling or Constraining Women's Choices**

The research project seeks to compare and contrast conceptualisations on women's empowerment in the development area, women's organisations and in cultural spheres such as the media and religion. The study aims to take into account the mutual influences various actors have had on each other and the contradictions and consolidations that occur in these discourses. The research has been divided into the following components:

- discourses of empowerment employed by donor agencies
- discourses of empowerment among political parties and among three major NGOs in Bangladesh
- discourses on women's empowerment in the media
- discourses of empowerment among three major women’s organizations and also the discourses around the women’s advancement policy and its recent changes.

The differing concepts regarding empowerment will be defined and analysed while trying to establish how one has influenced the other. The preliminary findings will be presented back to the four groups and the expected differences between them will be used as a means of challenging the prevalent thinking and understanding better why the different communities have differences in their thinking.

ii) **Stories of Change Film**

Pathways produced a video documentary titled *“stories of Change”* that travels through Bangladesh- through its hills, rivers and lanes- and through generations, following the narratives of a 16 years old cricketer to a 60 years old activist, and attempts to portray a different picture of Bangladeshi women. The film depicts the lives and struggles of 5 women as a part of its project to make visible the trajectories of change experienced in the lives of women. The Pathways Programme commissioned and produced this film in collaboration with Beginning Production Limited. The film, which is directed by Kamar Ahmed Simon of Beginning Production, had its premiere screening on 14th March, 2008 at the Russian Cultural Center in Dhaka.

The *Stories of Change* DVD also includes a *Conversation* with the protagonists, which is an epilogue to the documentary film. *Conversation* is a discussion and reflection by the five protagonists about the struggles and triumphs in their individual lives and the dreams they hold for a better future.
Stories of Change Film Tour

The *Stories of Change* documentary went on a country-wide tour during July 2007. The film was screened in six cities across Bangladesh—Dhaka, Rangamati, Chittagong, Sylhet, Khulna and Rajshahi—and generated much discussion and debate everywhere it went. At each screening, there was a panel discussion consisting of a media personality or journalist, a human rights activist and a teacher/professor who reflected on their thoughts about the film before of the audience.

More information about the film can be found at [www.storiesofchange.net](http://www.storiesofchange.net)

B. The **CHANGING NARRATIVES OF SEXUALITY** research theme takes the ‘body’ entry point into understanding the factors that can enhance women’s ability to exercise control over their own bodies in relation to sexuality, focusing in particular on religion, media and the intersection of global forces with the institutions that mediate women’s options and choices. The research projects conducted under this theme seek to understand the influence of major factors shaping understandings of women’s bodies and sexualities:

iii) Religion and Women

This research looks at resurgent Islam and its influence on the formation of female identities and sexualities with an aim to see whether the new forms of Islam in fact open up new spaces thereby ‘permitting’ women greater sexual rights than has been popularly perceived, and what might be learnt by the secular women’s movement from women’s organising in these new spaces.

The research worked with 3 main groups of respondents:

- Workers, including factory workers, home-based workers, and self-employed in small enterprises
- Students, which includes university students of both public and private universities in and around Dhaka (Dhaka and BRAC University) and Sylhet (Shah Jalal University).
- Women attending Taleem classes, which are classes expounding religious teachings, consisting of a group of women of all ages, who listen to a woman preacher/teacher and sometimes ask questions of religious import.

iv) Media and Women

This project explored the how Bangladeshi women engage with television and the meanings, choices and subjectivities they derive from it. The research sites were based in urban and peri-urban areas and we looked at women occupying positions that were relatively new and even transitory – women living in university dorms, in working hostels, in urban and peri-urban slums. The research explored whether there are possibilities of empowerment that open up through women’s engagement, pleasure, and learning from the Media.
v) Social Change through Cultural Production

This project is exploring how minority communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts projects identity, culture and change in the cultural productions of the Hill region and how Hill women interpret, negotiate and attach meaning to these narratives. The research hopes to influence media policies towards including the cultural productions of ethnic minorities in mainstream media.

vi) Cultural History of Bengali Muslim Women

This research is exploring the identity formation of Bengali Muslim women by investigating the cultural and political history of Bangladesh spanning the 20th Century. The first phase is looked into the early twentieth century and anti-colonial nationalist movements, and its address for women. How do women place themselves in this movement? The second phase is focusing on the middle decades of the twentieth century when language, culture and national identity become extremely important for Bengali Muslims. The third phase of the research will carry the themes of nation, culture, progress, modernity and women’s sexuality as it focuses on the contestations between them towards the end the millennium in a globalized world.

vii) Changing Images of Women Photo Exhibition

This project was undertaken to depict the changing images in the spheres of women’s voices, bodily integrity and work. It involved a competition among amateur photographers to make a photo-documentary that brings public attention to the changing position of women in our national life. After a short training, a group of mainly young, and surprisingly male, photographers went out with their cameras and had two weeks to capture contemporary images of women. 55 photographs were then selected to mount an exhibition that toured the country. The exhibition was launched on December 13, 2007, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of BRAC by BRAC Chairperson Fazle Hasan Abed. Pathways presented awards for the best photograph, best series, two special mentions and a certificate to all photographers who took part.

The exhibition remained in display in Dhaka before travelling to Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna, where the exhibit was opened in each location by an eminent personality. At every location, group discussions were held with students, garment factory workers and journalists. The photographic documentation of women’s lives enlivened the Pathways project by providing a visual record of the diversities in women’s journeys through change.

C. The theme BUILDING CONSTITUENCIES FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY takes the ‘voice’ entry point into exploring the politics of changing policies, and development and
political institutions, to lend greater support to women’s empowerment that promotes greater justice, equality and wellbeing for all. Projects under this theme include:

viii) Women in Local Government in Bangladesh and Pakistan

This project investigates the introduction and enabling conditions of women into local governance and its influence on women’s empowerment, including strengthening accountability of local governance institutions to women. The research worked with women councillors in local government in Bangladesh.

Local government reforms in Bangladesh aimed to create space for women through the following provisions: a) direct election to one-third of the seats that are reserved for women; b) one-third of the projects implemented by the local councils are chaired by women and another two-thirds include female members. These provisions were made in late 1990s. Since then two local government elections have taken place and the current generation of councillors are the ‘third generation’ who have come into power. The objectives of this study were to explore: a) the challenges faced by women councillors; b) how they negotiate these challenges; c) their own interpretation of their engagement pattern and processes; d) whether new values are being created.

ix) Review of Strategic Approaches to Building Constituencies by Women’s Organisations

The research project will seek to document and analyse strategies and approaches used by selected women’s organisations in Bangladesh to mobilise and advocate for women’s rights and raise demands to the State and other rights holders. The research investigated mobilizing strategies by 3 national women’s organization. The research involved in-depth interviews with organization members, analysis of newspaper coverage of events related to their mobilizing efforts, and readings of theoretical texts related to the subject. An advisory committee, with members from the academia, women’s organisations and the Pathways team, also guided the research.

D. The EMPOWERING WORK theme takes the ‘work’ entry point into investigating the relationships between paid work and empowerment and exploring the implications of changing markets in the wake of globalization for women’s rights, security and wellbeing as workers as a pathway of empowerment. The researches in this theme utilized quantitative data to generating new findings about women’s labour market participation:

x) Work Survey
This project involved establishing a panel of 5,300 women of different socio-economic backgrounds in Bangladesh, and using work as an entry point to explore pathways of change in women’s lives. The panel will serve as a source of quantitative data and a site for experimentations with indicators of empowerment and will feed into the Measuring and Assessing Empowerment project.

xi) Women Health Workers
This research explored how women community health workers are challenging various social constraints and stereotypes by being engaged in regular employment, in coming out of their homes, being mobile in their communities and fulfilling a socially valued role.

In Bangladesh: The research studied whether and how Women Health Workers are introducing new models for women, challenging purdah, encouraging mobility, and creating a pathway of empowerment. The study compared public (government) women health workers with non-government women health workers of pioneering programmes in three locations: ICDDR,B; Ganoshathya Kendro and BRAC.

In Pakistan: The Collective for Social Science Research in Karachi is partnering with BRAC under this research theme and will be conducting a study on women’s paid work and empowerment by focusing on the government sponsored Lady Health Worker programme.

For more information regarding the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Research Programme, please visit: www.pathwaysofempowerment.org or please contact, Samia A. Rahim at pathwayssa@gmail.com or at 8824051-4, ext. 4099 or 4070.