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The dream of the extremely poor woman in Bangladesh

Strategies of Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) as examples of achieving an alternative development in Bangladesh





Map of Bangladesh.

Front page: Photo of group leader of extremely poor women in Mymensing, Mohongonj, Bangladesh, February, 2004. Photo: Jeanette Schlucher.

My mission is to put one seed into the world where I can see no discrimination between man and woman. In that world man and woman will live in peace together.

-Begum Rokeya, Executive Director of Sabalamby Unnayan Samity

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Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest and most highly populated country. The *poorest* are the *women* of different reasons, one is that modernisation of agriculture has marginalized women tasks. *Non governmental organisations (NGOs)* have an important role in improving people's life quality. I visited an NGO in Bangladesh called Sabalamby Unnuyan Samity (SUS) and learned about strategies to meet the needs of poor women. My question in this essay is: How is it possible to achieve a development for the poor in Bangladesh, which will improve their life quality and pay attention to their knowledge and wishes. My thesis is that a *bottom-up perspective*, with a focus on participation of the poorest women and women empowerment is a successful and necessary strategy to reach a development for the poor.

I give examples of *skill training for girls*, *micro-credit* for poor women and *REFLECT* training for the poorest women. The REFLECT method is a participation method inspired by the Brazilian pedagogue *Paolo Freire*. Micro - credit, skill training and REFLECT training are methods of *women empowerment*. The development which then appears could be called an *alternative development*.

I make use of Paolo Freire's, *Richard Chamber's* and *Michels Foucault's* philosophies of power as it is important to understand who has the power to make positive changes for the poor. The conclusion is that it is possible for the poorest women to change their lives with help of strategies as exemplified by the NGO Sabalamby Unnuyan Samity (SUS), but there are hindrances. The macro level politics on the global and national arena which marginalize poor, must be changed and permit space for local politics. The government and governmental institutions have failed to reach development in Bangladesh. Empowerment of women will never reach its full opportunities if politics is not changed. But there are hopes that empowered women will involve themselves in politics.

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Introduction

Begum Rokeya inspired me to come to Bangladesh at an international trade union course at Visingsgö in Sweden. Begum Rokeya was invited by the Jönköping - Bangladesh Sister Community Association and she informed us about the situation for women in Bangladesh. Begum Rokeya is the Executive director of Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) and also the founder of the organisation. SUS is a local Non Governmental Organisation (NGO). My friend and trade union colleague Karin Lindgren, also attended the course at Visingsö. We decided to visit Begum Rokeya and her organisation in Netrakona during two weeks in February 2004. I decided to write my thesis during the spring and to use the perspectives that I attained through my studies in Human Ecology.

It is an overwhelming experience for a westerner to enter the world of Bangladesh, situated east of India and surrounded by India and Myanmar. The population in this densely populated country was estimated to 131 millions in 2000 and has a yearly increase of 2,8%¹. The area is about one third of the area of Sweden's. What struck a foreigner is that we certainly live in a world divided by different economical possibilities. The Netrakona town is dusty, the buildings are simple small houses, very often only made of sheet metal in lines beside the street. In the rural areas cow dung was the traditional building material. The air is polluted by smoke from wood stoves which makes the air dense. Cars are rare objects in this town. The men, wear the traditional *lungi*, which is a skirt, and women wear beautiful *salwar kameez* or colourful *saris*. The *salwar kameez*, is a tunic with baggy trousers and with a long scarf called *dupatta* or *orna*, which is draped backwards over the shoulder to cover the chest and sometimes the head. Women with *burkhas* or *nikabs* are common. A *burkha* covers the whole body, including the face, a *nikab* covers the mouth and nose. Most women are at home, though, and take care of the household. Hard working rickshaw drivers cycle around with ornamented rickshaws with one or two travellers on the seat. At night there are oil lamps hanging under their rickshaws. Netrakona town is surrounded by rice-fields, and no machines are seen, but there are always people, also children, who clean the fields from weeds with their hands. To meet the poor women in the villages, was an experience in itself. I was also privileged, because I could join the "Language Day". Every year, on February 21th, the Bengalis celebrates its Bangla Language Movement and pays respects to those who sacrificed their lives in its name on February 21, 1952, when the government in Pakistan tried to force the language Urdu upon the East-Pakistan (Bangladesh). At

¹ Website of Utrikespolitiska institutet. www.ui.se. Världen i Fakta.2004-04-28

that occasion students in Dhaka protested and police gave open fire, and many were killed. The 21th February 2004 a worthy and respectful celebration took place. Currently, the tricky political situation is not edifying. We stepped right in to a “hartal”, which is a strike organized by opposition party by help of criminals. Violence and disturbances are common in politics and society.

Trans disciplinary perspectives of women in development

My question in this essay is: How is it possible to achieve a development for the poor in Bangladesh, which will improve their life quality and recognise to their knowledge and wishes. I call the development then achieved *an alternative development*. An alternative development is an alternative to the development with the inherent logic made up by WTO (World Trade Organisation), where trade liberalisation, economical growth even for rich parts of the world and privatisation are crucial. My thesis is that a bottom-up perspective, with a focus on participation of the poorest women and women empowerment is a successful and necessary strategy to reach a development for the poor. Most people live in rural areas in Bangladesh, and I have focused on women in rural development. Braidotti et.al. write about women as both victims and solution of the development crisis. Women and the poor have often been the same group in the development debate.² The organisation we visited is called Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) and it is a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO). SUS works for the poor, and especially the poor women. I noticed during my stay in Bangladesh that the method they used for empowering what SUS called “the extremely poor women” had a quite revolutionary approach. The method SUS use is called REFLECT³. SUS define “extremely poor” people, as those who are shelter-less without any assets at all.⁴ The aim of this essay has been to describe, problematize and discuss in what way SUS, used as an example, has found ways to cope with developmental problems by working with the poorest women. My limitations are that a two-week visit and studying of literature do not give enough knowledge of the complex society of Bangladesh. Quick visits in two villages do not give satisfactory material or knowledge about life in rural Bangladesh. Of course, this would take

² Braidotti, R., E. Charkiewicz, S. Häusler & S. Wieringa. 1995. *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis*. London: Zed Books. p 85.

³ REFLECT= Regenerated Freieran Literacy through Empowering Techniques.

⁴ Information from SUS staff member, Monitor & Analyst Murshed Iqbal Rimu.

years. The writer of development issues, Richard Chambers⁵, who has long practical and research experience in rural development, define my kind of visit as “Rural development tourism”. By this he means quick visits in rural surroundings during the dry season, made by thousands of people, academics, people from governmental institutions and different kinds of experts. Chambers write that rural tourism is “barely conceivable as the topic for the thesis”. I fully agree with Chambers critique, and that is why my thesis is quite general.

We visited the north - eastern part of Bangladesh, in the city of Netrakona within the district with the same name during the 14-25th of February 2004. Netrakona town is situated 160 km from the capital Dhaka. We also visited the rural surroundings around Netrakona and a village in the district of Mymensingh west of Netrakona. During the stay I interviewed seven people, the Executive Director (Begum Rokeya) of SUS, four members from the staff and two NGO workers from England. We visited three groups of “extremely poor women” in two villages in Mohongonj, in Mymensingh district and had a meeting with the SUS staff in this district. We also visited a shelter house for adolescent girls. My companion Karin Lindgren interviewed the girls about their hope for the future. The discussion with the “extremely poor women” and the interviews with the adolescent girls were the translated by staff members from SUS. The 25th of March we listened to Begum Rokeya again, when she held a lecture, at a meeting at the Jönköping - Bangladesh Sister Community Association. Afterwards I had the opportunity to interview Begum Rokeya again about the women via e-mail. During all interviews and meetings I took notes. I have also interviewed a person who wants to be anonymous, due to the political climate, which is not a climate of openness and tolerance. It is not revealed where this person works and his/her position. The voices from the interviewees should be regarded as comments, not as a way of confirming truths. Just recently I also listened to a lecture in Sweden arranged by the Swallows in Lund.

This is an essay in Human Ecology which make it possible to use trans disciplinary perspectives when describing women in development. In this field the ambition is to integrate different scientific perspectives. The Swedish government has defined the field in the following way:

Human Ecology studies the interaction between humans and their total environment. Of interest is both how humans adapt to and utilize their environment and how the environment influences and constrains human activity. Human Ecology studies human life and human activity in different ecosystems and different cultures in the present and in the past in order to gain a better understanding of the factors which influence the interaction between humans and their environment. The ambition to achieve a more comp-

⁵ Chambers, R. 1992. *Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed and Participatory*. Discussion Paper 311. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. p 10-12.

lete view requires an integrated perspective that transcends traditional boundaries between the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and technology.⁶

I believe that everything must be read and understood within a context. At the same time, the context must be an approximation, because the truth is never there to enclose the situation. There is always another angle to explain the same circumstances. As an example, when a Bengalese researcher in administrative science writes that the structures in NGOs in Bangladesh are horizontal⁷ and a Swedish researcher in sociology writes that NGOs in Bangladesh are structured in a hierarchical way we have to understand that nobody is wrong, but that the researchers represent different discourses.⁸ Administrative science and sociology are different discourses and those disciplines use different languages, they investigate different relations. The Swedish researcher, we suppose, compare from sociological experience in Swedish organisations, and the Bengalese researcher has compared the administration with governmental organisations in Bangladesh. The researchers are also members of different cultures.

The Bengalese society exists within a context created out of e.g. history, religion, politics and global economy. For the overall picture of poor women's development a part of this context must be described. I have tried to give a background, i.e. the discourse or external settings, e.g. political climate and global development discourse.

Power relations in the present situation in Bangladesh is illuminated in the discussion, because it is also about who has the power to change. Who takes the power to make a change for poor women? Is it The World Bank, the Bengalese government, the NGOs or the poor women? Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbergs analyse Michael Foucault's philosophy of power. In Foucault's thinking of power, power exists only in relations and in action. Institutions, he argues, only organise already existing power relations. Power is everywhere, it is expressed in different micro connections. The power could be transformed and through different social practices.⁹ Maarten A Hajer writes that in the Foucaultian analyses of power one should give emphasis to the study of combined effects of various micro – powers or powers/ knowledge rather than the study of a single “sovereign” as the almighty state. Foucault spoke about the need to investigate these micro – powers that brought about transformations. He was

⁶ Website of Human Ecology division. www.humecol.lu.se 2004-04-19

⁷ Afroza, B. 2003. *Government – NGO interface in Development Management*. Dhaka: Mohiuddin & Sons, Paragon Enterprice. p 6.

⁸ Arvidson, M. 2003. *Demanding Values, Participation, empowerment and NGOs in Bangladesh*. Lund: Dept. of Sociology, Lund University. p 143.

⁹ Alvesson, M. & S. Sköldberg. 1994. *Tolkning och reflektion, vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod*. Lund: Studentlitteratur. p 303-304.

also very convinced that these transformations happened according to definable rules, a discursive order.¹⁰ I will return to Foucault's understanding of power in the discussion.

I have tried to listen to both voices from South Asia, and especially Bangladesh, as well as voices from western countries, from both men and women. I have tried to understand different discourses to broaden my knowledge about development in Bangladesh. I had focused on the bottom-up perspective in the beginning and changed it after the visit in Bangladesh to a women focus. It would have been much easier if I had had the right focus from the beginning. On the other hand, in the process of learning it is never too late to change focus.

The need for an alternative development

The need for an improvement of life quality in many poor people's lives is evident. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) reports that the number of people living under national poverty line in Bangladesh is about 34%, and people living with less than 2 \$ a day is about 83%¹¹ and the UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) reports that the under-five mortality in Bangladesh is very high. 325 000 children die every year due to various diseases, malnutrition and accidents.¹² Terry Cannon refers to a recent Asian Development Bank report, which concludes that over 95% of female-headed households are below the poverty line in Bangladesh. A realistic figure of how many households that are female-headed for Bangladesh is 20-30 %.¹³ Association for Women's Rights in development claim that the economic changes as trade liberalization, structural adjustment and privatisation have increased women's poverty and that women's needs are marginalized in the global economy.¹⁴ Vandana Shiva had observed women's exclusion from participation in development projects. She argues that the U.N. Decade for Women was based on the assumption that improvement of women's economic situation would automatically emerge out of the development process.¹⁵ Women bear the cost but were excluded from the benefits and development in itself

¹⁰ Hajer, A. M. 1995. *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. New York: Oxford university Press. p 39, 48.

¹¹ Website of United Nations report of Human development 2003.

http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/cty_f_BGD.html 2004-05-05

¹² Website of UNICEF. www.unicef.org/infobycountry/bangladesh.html 2004-04-21

¹³ Cannon, T. 2002. Gender and climate hazards in Bangladesh. *Gender and development*. vol.10, No.2.

¹⁴ Website of Association for Women's right in Development. <http://www.awid.org/wrec>. 2004-05-11

¹⁵ The Decade for women was during 1976-1985.

was the problem, according to her analysis. She considers the economic growth as a new colonialism, as it drains away resources from those who need it most.¹⁶ The following chapter describes the global development discourse and the beliefs and arguments of how this development assists both rich and poor. The conclusion that the development paradigm of the western culture and classical developmental programs have not improved the lives of the poorest, must be taken into serious consideration. What kind of development does the poor want and could they define it? And those who have least, the poorest women, how does they define progress for themselves? It is sometimes referred to and as previously mentioned I would like to call the kind of development which occurs when the poor themselves define their needs and themselves take action for change, for an *alternative development*.

Poverty has many faces, so a definition of the conception of poverty is essential. The United Nations made a definition in line with the Millennium Declaration on Development and Poverty in 1997. The definition of poverty includes living standard, education and literacy, longevity, economic provisioning and access to health and safe water. In its more extended definition, human poverty includes such as; the lack of political freedom and personal security, inability to participate in decision-making and in the life of a community, and the threats to sustainability and intergenerational equity.¹⁷ To increase food production, might be an immediate idea of how to solve problems of famine. Richard Chamber rightly observes that the insight of the 1980s is that the problem is not to produce enough food in the world, it is more about having access to the food produced. He also is concerned about sustainable livelihood for the people where they live in rural areas. The alternative to migrate to urban areas where life is insecure and the migrated depress wages and income of other poor is not the best solution.¹⁸ Poverty could be created out of a multitude of events in history, like colonisation, political instability, environmental destruction, overpopulation and so on. For the improvement of life quality some kind of development of the society or of the individuals lives is necessary.

The Brundtland commission, pushed the term “Sustainable development” into the political arena in 1983. The term has by now become a concept that is used in so many different applications that it has actually lost the original meaning. The now well known words “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future genera-

¹⁶ Shiva, V. 1996. *Let Us Survive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Ruether, R. eds. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*. London: SCM Press Ltd. p 65.

¹⁷ Website of United Nations. Saadallah, S. www.un.org, *WomenWatch Transcending Difference: The United Nations Role*.

¹⁸ Chambers, R. 1994. *Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for rural development*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications. p 62.

tions to meet their own needs”¹⁹, from the commission is drowned in demands for expanding trade liberalization, economical growth and privatisation, which is considered to be equal with sustainability. The term “Sustainable development” is sometimes criticised as being used by governments in the rich world, with the aim to increase consumption in their own, already over consuming countries. In this rhetoric, governments are not questioning the environmental impact of the concept with a forever increasing consumption. In the rich countries, we consume so much energy resources that the consequences for the future climate could be severe. In this case it would be more sustainable to spare the energy resources for the future, even if the economical growth would decline. In Europe there are compelling examples of how “Sustainable development” is interpreted. In Year 2000 at Lisbon, the European council set a new strategy goal for the union “ to become the most *competitive and dynamic knowledge - based economy* in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”.²⁰ It is not questioned if economic growth is consistent with a sustainable development for the environment. But already the conference of UNCED in Rio 1992 had interpretations of sustainability that had diverged from the original meaning. As a matter of fact, the UNDP document “Agenda 21” emphasises on the trade liberalization.²¹ The underlying logic in Agenda 21 is the same as in the World Trade Organisation, WTO. In a clarifying document from WTO, the organisation declares the logic.

The WTO is sometimes described as a “free trade” institution, but that is not entirely accurate. The system does allow tariffs and, in limited circumstances, other forms of protection. More accurately, it is a system of rules dedicated to open, fair and undistorted competition. [...] Over three quarters of WTO members are developing countries and countries in transition to market economies. During the seven and a half years of the Uruguay Round, over 60 of these countries implemented trade liberalization programmes autonomously. [...] The data show a definite statistical link between freer trade and economic growth. Economic theory points to strong reasons for the link. All countries, including the poorest, have assets — human, industrial, natural, financial — which they can employ to produce goods and services for their domestic markets or to compete overseas. Economics tells us that we can benefit when these goods and services are traded. Simply put, the principle of “comparative advantage” says that countries prosper first by taking advantage of their assets in order to concentrate on what they can produce best, and then by trading these products for products that other countries produce best. In other words, liberal trade policies — policies that allow the unrestricted flow of goods and services — sharpen competition, motivate innovation and breed success. They multiply the rewards that result from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price.²²

¹⁹ Brundtland, G.H. 1987. *World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. WCED. p 7.

²⁰ Website of European Commission. www.europa.eu.int/comm/lisbon_strategy/index_en.html 2004-04-12

²¹ Miljö- och Naturskärningsdepartementet. 1993. *Förenta nationernas konferens om miljö- och utveckling*. Stockholm: Norstedts tryckeri. p 4-12.

²² http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/understanding_e.doc

This logic of classical market and trade theories of “comparative advantage” is however criticized for benefiting the rich countries. The critic from Maud Johansson of the Swedish organization Forum Syd is that in practice the WTO regulations and agreements do not benefit the poor countries. The most discussed agreement is the agreement on agriculture. Most people in the Third World are dependent on agriculture, about 60 %, and in many countries even more. The farmers are not capable of competing with cheaper products from the rich world. Markets in the poor world get cheap products from the rich world, in such amounts that the poor cannot sell their products on their own markets. The argument is also that cheaper production is built upon non sustainable use of natural resources, overuse of fresh water and chemicals, with environmental destruction as a result.²³ WTO agreements as TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property rights) heavily impact the agriculture. Philip Gain and Priscilla Raj have made a scrutiny of citizen’s responses to environmental issues. They noticed that though the TRIPS has been heavily criticized because it does not protect the intellectual property rights of the farming societies in the world, the public discussion in Bangladesh so far is very limited. It is because problems with protection and conservation of crop varieties are unknown to the public, but there are some government and non -government initiatives to protect biodiversity. There are three institutional gene banks in the country owned by Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), Bangladesh Jute Research Institute (BJRI) and the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI). The BRRI have 1500 rice cultivars.²⁴

The idea of a forever growing economy for rich countries is also criticized, as for example by the senior Economist in the World Bank Herman E. Daly. He advocates a “Steady-States economics”, without growth and with a lower impact on the environment. His conclusion for the developing economies and the rich countries is that:

It is absolutely a waste of time as well as morally backward to preach steady-state doctrines to underdeveloped countries before the overdeveloped countries have taken any measure to reduce either their own population growth or the growth of the per-capita resource consumption. Therefore the steady-state paradigm must first of all be adopted and applied to the overdeveloped countries. That does not mean that the underdeveloped countries can be left out of consideration. For one thing, the underdeveloped countries are not ever going to developed unless the overdeveloped countries moderate their demands on world resources and absorption capacities.²⁵

²³ Johansson, M. 2001. *En annan värld är möjlig*. Ergon J. eds. Attac. Danmark: Manifest Kulturproduktion AB. p 138-141.

²⁴ Gain, P. & P. Raj. 2002. *Citizens Responses to Environmental Issues*. Gain P. eds. Society for Environment and Human Development. *Bangladesh Facing the 21st Century*. Dhaka: The CAD System p 325.

²⁵ Daly. H.E. 1992. *Steady State economics*. London:Earthscan Publications Ltd. p 148.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh had a review in 2001 of how Bangladesh has lost and gained from the globalisation of economy. The conclusion is that trade liberalisation is unlikely to be sufficient to improve the lot of the poor. The researchers in the Centre have very carefully investigated statistics of growth, poverty, income distribution and so on. Two of their questions which have been investigated are first if trade liberalisation (and economic reforms in general) raised Bangladesh' rate of growth secondly if the changed growth performance has led to any changes in poverty in the country. The growth of the industrial sector and in the agricultural sector was examined. The annual growth of the industry increased by nearly two percent after liberalisation, while agricultural growth decelerated compared to pre-liberalisation period.²⁶ The situation reversed after some years and there was a significantly higher growth of agriculture. In the manufacture sector, there were sharp fluctuations. Despite the better economic growth during the post-liberalisation period the number of poor people increased from 56 million in 1983/84 to 65 million in 1995/96 and remained at 58 million in 1999. The Centre also informs us about that the real wage rate of agricultural labourers has stagnated compared to other groups. The Centre concludes that the inequitable socio-economic structure that persists in the rural areas constrains the abilities for e.g. landless and marginal farmers to benefit from technological changes. Another conclusion from the Centre is that the trade liberalisation has contributed to the widening of income inequities.²⁷ Shahzad Uddin and Trevor Hopper strongly criticize the IMF (International Monetary Found), the World Bank and the Western capitalist states for not providing the technical infrastructure and organisational capacity to execute their neo-liberal agenda. They have made a careful evaluation of the privatisation in Bangladesh. Uddin and Hopper say that The World Bank and the IMF have encouraged many LDCs (Least Developed Countries) to pursue privatisation policies.²⁸ To not privatise might hinder them from finance from the World Bank, the IMF and northern aid donors. Both when it came to the World Bank's more narrow definition of progress, as profitability and when it came to the neglected developmental aims as employment conditions, including trade union and individual rights, social returns and financial transparency privatisation was a failure.²⁹

²⁶ The pre-liberalisation period is 1983/84 to 1991/92 and after liberalisation period is 1991/92 to 1995/96.

²⁷ Centre for Policy dialogue.2002. *Bangladesh facing the challenges of globalisation: A review of Bangladesh's development 2001*. Dhaka: The University Press limited. p 158.

²⁸ There are criteria for the classification of a LDC country, and the United Nations Economic and Social Council is responsible for this classification.

²⁹ Uddin, S. & T. Hopper. 2003. Accounting for privatisation in Bangladesh: Testing World Bank Claims. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, no 14, p 739, 768.

Different writers have suggested that the development in the world leads to centres and peripheries. The professor in Human Ecology in Lund, Alf Hornborg shows that the foundation of *machine technology* is not primarily know-how, but unequal exchange in the world, which results in a global polarization of wealth and power.³⁰ He also reminds us of Wallerstein's *world's system theory*. Wallerstein argues that economic history could be understood by uneven relations of exchange and power between the semi peripheries and the peripheries.³¹ Hornborg adds the thermodynamics to more fully understand the relation between the centre and the periphery. He explains that products are not refined but degraded resources. And that for societies engaged in production for the market it is necessary to use another measure than the market price to show exploitive exchange, that measure should be energy. The injustice in energy consumption gets obvious when Hornborg compare that the United States uses 25% of the world energy consumption, while 20% of the world's people do not have access to enough energy to maintain their own body metabolism.³² Money is of course one measure, but it does not give us the information about who really is responsible for the world's environmental destruction and how this exploitation is intimately linked to the exploitation of people. Hornborg also refers to Arghiri Emmanuel on how wage differences between areas leads to an unequal exchange of hours of labour, as the low-wage country has to export more products in exchange for a given volume of imports from high wage country than it would have needed to if the wage level had been uniform.³³ Money as an insufficient measure gets more clear if you compare the money measure with the energy measure. Developmental economists aware of inequalities in the world do not have this view of physical world and their comprehensions therefore differ from Hornborg's. De Vylder et.al. compares the worlds yearly exports and show that "the least developed countries in the world" (LDCs) exports only 0.4% of the total export in the world. That is a comparison made with money as measure. There are 49 LDCs in the world and Bangladesh, being the largest LDC country has one fifth of the inhabitants of these countries.³⁴ Hornborg strongly criticises the kind of comparisons that de Vylder showed. Hornborg has even found statistics of the dollar-based General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). In 1984 fuels accounted for 46.8% of the

³⁰ Hornborg, A. 2001. *The Power of the Machine, Global Inequalities of Economy, Technology and the Environment*. Oxford: Altamira Press. p 2.

³¹ Hornborg 2001:37

³² Hornborg 2001: 16, 29

³³ Hornborg 2001: 21-25

³⁴ de Vylder, S., G. Axelsson Nycander & M. Laanatz. 2001. *De minst utvecklade länderna i världshandeln*. Sida studies no 5. 21-25, 53

exports from developing areas, but only 7.8% from developed countries.³⁵ Hornborg blames “the machine”, i.e. development of technology in the North as one reason of the inequalities. “The machine” is actually both a metaphor and a physical fact of the rich worlds superior position. He writes:

We do not recognize that what ultimately keep our machines running are global terms of trade. The power of the machine is not of the machine, but of the asymmetric structures of exchange of which it is an expression.³⁶

The overall attitude is that the poor world can take up the technological race in an – every one can win-ideology. Serge Latouche sarcastic remark is:

Who would want to bet on Bangladesh, Ethiopia or Burkina Faso? What chances have these countries of entering the technological race, or of putting up their own telecommunications satellites? Or of rebuilding a high-performance industry? In the present corner absolutely none. It would not matter if they adopted a liberal, socialist or any other conceivable approach [...]. uprooted rural people in the LDCs are “outcasts from the great banquet of overconsumption” . [...]. We do not have small groups marginalized people, poor people constitute an *other* society.³⁷

In one sense I think Latouche is wrong. There are countries that successfully, in neo-classic economical terms, enter the technological race, we have seen examples in Asia, e.g. India. The middle class in India is a growing class and they consume as westerners. We also know that there are big classes of poor and marginalized people and also expanding environmental destruction in India. There is a large and rapidly growing consumer market up to 300 million people, the market for branded consumer goods is estimated to be growing at 8% per annum and that the demand for several consumer products is growing at over 12% per annum.³⁸ But there are some other facts about the state of India. Moudud Ahmed, who compares economies between countries in Asia, reminds us that India also face problems of extreme poverty. The proportion of children suffering from malnutrition is 63%.³⁹ The point and the inherent logic for some of the researchers are that new centres appear, but always at the expense of other areas or groups of people. On the other hand Latouche could be right, maybe that Bangladesh and the other poor countries never will become a “centre”. Hornborg, as many others, point out that the gap in the world is deepening. It has been calculated that the 225 richest individuals in the world own assets equal to the purchasing power of the 47% poorest percent

³⁵ Hornborg 2001:63

³⁶ Hornborg 2001:3

³⁷ Latouche, S. *In the wake of the affluent society, an exploration of post-development*. 1993. London: Zeed book ltd. p 41-42.

³⁸ <http://business.indiaserver.com/india-investment.html> 2004-05-04

³⁹ Ahmed, M. 2002. *South Asia Crisis of Development*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited. p 208.

of the planets population.⁴⁰ The gap is noticed in several fields. Chambers noticed the “cores and peripheries” of knowledge. Globally, the distribution of knowledge reflect a gradient from extreme wealth to extremes of poverty. At one end is the rich, urban, industrialised, high status core, and at the other, poor, rural, agricultural and low status peripheries. Both internationally and within third world countries, forces draw resources and educated people away from the peripheries and in towards the centres. Skills migrate from rural to urban areas, from smaller to larger urban areas.⁴¹

But remember that “development” is not only a matter of economy. When development is required a modern idea is forced upon societies and individuals. The aim of “development” has been to become a “modern” society. There are different images of the evolution of modern era, i.e. the change of societies the latest 300-400 years. Giddens discusses the ambiguous character of the modern society. In the modern society there are possibilities for the individual of a more safe and rich life, but there is also a dark side, with environmental destruction and the development of a threatening military technology.⁴² Giddens means that modernity has thrown us away from all kinds of traditional societies. Modernity differs from other periods both when it comes to “extensionality” and to “intensionality”, i.e. that modernity is widespread and involve an extensive change in everyday life. The impact of social evolutionism is one reason why the discontinuity of modernity has not been fully understood. Even Marx, who emphasised discontinuity, believed that history has a direction. Giddens defines the discontinuities that differ the modern era from traditional societies. One is the rate of change, which is extreme, most obvious for technology. The other is that the waves of changes go very far, in fact all over the world.⁴³ Shiva reaches the conclusion that there are links between development and cultural crisis. Since diversity characterizes nature and society in the Third World, the attempt to homogenize nature gets linked to the homogenisation of society.⁴⁴

Braidotti et.al.’s main point is that the western project to modernize the post-colonial societies did not bring the promised improvements for poor people as expected. The development process instead contributed to the growth of poverty, to an increase in economic

⁴⁰ Hornborg 2001:61

⁴¹ Chambers, R. 1991. *Rural Development, Putting the Last First*. New York: Longman Scientific & Technical. p 4-5.

⁴² Giddens 1996: 7-8

⁴³ Giddens 1996: 4

⁴⁴ Shiva, V. 1996. *Let Us Survive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Ruether, R. eds. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*. London: SCM Press Ltd. p 71.

and gender inequalities and environmental destruction, which further strain the efforts of the poor people to make a livelihood, especially women.⁴⁵

Importance of women in an alternative and rural development

The UNDP department FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) has recognized that between 60 and 80 percent of the food in most developing countries are produced by women, but that women's limited access to resources together with others factors force them into a subordinate role, which is a hindrance to their own development and that of the society as a whole.⁴⁶ Necessary changes within societies could be impossible if a gender approach is not used. SUS describe that one of the problems of “restructuring the society” is the inferior role for women. According to SUS, women (and the poor) have been de-linked from any kind of social, political and economic development in the society.⁴⁷ The majority of those who live in rural areas in South Asia are women. They are responsible for producing food, but they have least access to means of production and receive low or none wages.⁴⁸ On the other hand Braidotti et.al point out that women’s lives and problems are not seen in it’s whole complexity. Women in poor countries are heavily overburdened, which makes them have very small margins for change.⁴⁹

There has been a changing role of the agricultural sector for the past fifty years. The dramatic impact of the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the increasing commercialisation in the 1980s and experiments with different strategies of rural development have highlighted the importance of rural development to human development. In Bangladesh women agricultural worker exceed that of male agricultural workers as a percentage of total men employed. Of all women employed about 70% work in agriculture, and of all men employed 60% work in the agriculture sector. Women participate in all operations, as live-stock management, crop production such as sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting as well as post-harvest operations such as drying, grinding, husking and storage.⁵⁰ Braidotti et.al. make a review of the evolvement of the theme “Women, environment and development” in the development debate. The development organizations at first the 1950s and 1960s only

⁴⁵ Braidotti et.al. 1995: 1

⁴⁶ Website of FAO. J. Jiggins. 1986. *Gender-related Impacts and the Work of the International Agricultural Research Centres*, World Bank, Washington, DC. www.fao.org/FOCUS/E/Women/green-e.htm. 2004-05-11

⁴⁷ Sabalamby Unnuyan Samity. 2004. *Annual report 2003*. Netrakona: SUS. p 1.

⁴⁸ Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre. 2002. *Human Development in South Asia 2002*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited. p 109.

⁴⁹ Braidotti et.al. 1995:83

⁵⁰ Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Center 2002:107

recognized women's economic role in reproduction and housekeeping. This of course was reflected in development programmes. The importance of women in production was disregarded, e.g. in agriculture. Braidotti et.al. refers to Ester Boserup as one of the first researchers who documented women's contribution to production, especially in agriculture in the Third World. Boserup showed that the men were drawn into the modern agriculture whereas the women remained in the subsistence agriculture with no access to training, credits or technology. New agriculture methods had negative impact on women as their traditional roles in agriculture production were replaced by technology. For example herbicides overtook women's role in weeding and introduction of new high yield varieties of crops pushed women from their traditional work of seed selection. Women continued food production for the household on marginal land unsuitable for cash crop production.⁵¹ Jiggins at the World Bank explains the loss of wage labour with introduction of technology in agriculture. Tasks that women traditionally perform have been mechanized and the handed over to men. Manual dehusking of rice is the most important source of female wage employment in rural areas in Bangladesh, but the modern rice mills employ men.⁵²

FAO considers the introduction of the Green Revolution with high yielding rice and wheat, better irrigation and chemical fertilizers as successful for meeting the increased demand for food as the population was growing. But FAO also concludes that this development has not benefited the rural poor, under nutrition and poverty is still a problem.⁵³ Researchers about Bangladesh at the Mahbub ul Haq human Development centre write that the negative social and environmental effect of the Green Revolution erase some of the positive effects. There are negative effects of land, water, forest and bio-diversity in the region due to the modernization of agriculture. The increasing feminisation of poverty linked to this development worries the centre.⁵⁴ Professor MM Akash reaches the conclusion that the farmers got trapped by the Green Revolution. The traditional practices were abandoned and they became dependent on chemical fertilizers. Prices on chemical inputs shot up as the subsidies were withdrawn. The monoculture have created pest problems, by pests not previously seen in traditional farming. Stronger pesticides are used as the pests are becoming resistant to chemicals. Akash claims that women's role was not recognized in the Green Revolution.

⁵¹ Braidotti 1995: 78-79

⁵² Website of FAO. J. Jiggins. 1986. *Gender-related Impacts and the Work of the International Agricultural Research Centres*, World Bank, Washington, DC. www.fao.org/FOCUS/E/Women/green-e.htm. 2004-05-11

⁵³ Website of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation). www.fao.org/FOCUS/E/Women/Sustin-e.htm 2004-05-11

⁵⁴ Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Center 2002:4

Women had to carry heavier headloads and walk longer distances for collecting fuel wood and fodder.⁵⁵



Employed women, spreading rice for drying, Netrakona, 2004.
Photo: Jeanette Schlaucher

In Bangladesh studies have shown that the highest involvement of women in agriculture comes from households with the smallest landholdings. Women in South Asia are often involved in part or in whole in livestock activities. In Bangladesh women feed livestock, clean sheds, secure the animals for the night, take care of their health and collect the dung. In livestock management women have greater control over decision-making and also their income; men consult women when they want to market livestock. Women are involved and important, though they are invisible in official statistics. Most women work as unpaid agricultural workers or as family helpers with their male as head of landholdings where only male are paid. This makes it difficult to measure women's contribution to the agriculture and national accounts becomes difficult.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Akash, M.M. 2002. *Ecological Farming: cultivating for life*. Gain P. ed. Society for Environment and Human Development. *Bangladesh Facing the 21st Century*. Dhaka: The CAD System. p 54-55.

⁵⁶ Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Center 2002:108-109

Context of Bangladesh

What political climate do the NGOs have to work within to achieve an alternative development? I will give a short review of this situation in the chapter *Political climate*. The nearest history tells us something about how the situation emerged of economical liberalization and donor dependency, which is described in the chapter *Roots of dependency and liberalisation of economy in Bangladesh*. It is evident as the working areas of the NGOs and the government are overlaid and that there is problem with the declining governmental responsibilities. NGOs, exemplified by SUS are described in the chapter *NGOs in Bangladesh and Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS)*. Finally the situation for women in Bangladesh is described in the chapter *Women in Bangladesh*.

Political climate

Maybe the best way to get insight in what's going on currently in Bangladesh is to get information from one of the website that make news available. On "The Stars" website following news is declared the 28th of February 2004 from the news agency AP;

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) - Authorities tightened security across Bangladesh on Wednesday, as a general strike aimed at forcing the government to hold early elections shut down shops and schools and disrupted public transport. The main opposition Awami League party, which has set an April 30 deadline for Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's government to resign and hold early polls, called for the dawn-to-dusk shutdown. It has accused the government of corruption, incompetence and harassment of political opponents. Zia denies the allegations and has vowed to stay in power until her five-year term ends in 2006. More than 5,000 security forces armed with riot gear patrolled the near-deserted streets of Dhaka, the capital city of 10 million people. Security was similarly tight in more than 60 other cities and towns. Police erected barbed-wire barricades outside the downtown headquarters of the opposition party preventing its members from taking to the streets, witnesses said. No clashes were immediately reported. Commuters in Dhaka either walked or used a few state-run buses or rickshaws. The strike did not affect trains, river ferries and air flights, authorities said. However, long-distance buses halted. The Bangladeshi opposition often uses general strikes to highlight its demands and embarrass the government. Violence is common during such protests and many people stay home to avoid trouble. The strike follows more than a week of demonstrations during which police detained about 15,000 people in raids on Dhaka's bus, train, ferry terminals and slums. Many detainees were released after questioning. Police said the arrests were made following intelligence reports suggested opposition party supporters were converging on the capital "to carry out anti-government attacks." – AP.⁵⁷

When we entered Dhaka there was a similar strike, called a "hartal" going on. The shops were closed and the traffic had stopped. Begum Rokeya had planned to fetch us by car, but could not go there because of the "hartal". The car could be destroyed by criminal gangs, we were

⁵⁷ Website of the Newspaper The Star.

www.thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2004/4/28/latest/17136Antigover&sec=latest 2004-04-28

told. The “hartal” was finished at 6 p.m. This situation is however not new. Amberntsson followed the election 2001 in Bangladesh, when the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) party won together with a Muslim fraction. The time before and after the election was very violent. Hundreds of persons were killed and thousands were bodily injured. Ethnic minorities were persecuted, people were driven to escape, women were raped and families got their houses burned. Awami League accuse BNP for the violence before and after the election. On the other hand, during the Awami League period, the society were further brutalized. It has happened several times that Awami League did not make proper investigations about violent crimes. Amberntsson consider the democracy vulnerable and refers to an investigation which shows that Bangladesh is the most corrupt country in the world.⁵⁸ Sarbari Majumdar also reported from the last elections and the situations for the Hindus, who are about 10% of the population. Attacks on the Hindus started when the secular Awami League left the government to an interim government. The leader of the interim government paid no attention to reports on the attacks. The attacks were said to have been performed by the coalition, now in power. The leaders of anti fundamentalist groups say that the Hindus were a “vote bank” for the Awami League. Majumdar refers to the leader Shahriyar Kabir, of the group called “The committee against the murderers from 1971”. Kabir says, that after the election the Hindus now are persecuted because the fundamentalists want Bangladesh to become a united Muslim state, and the Hindus have no place there.⁵⁹ The correspondent Bertil Litner in 2002 warned for the growing fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Not only is it an internal problem, there are terrorists who want a hiding place after the bombing in Afghanistan by USA. What was maybe predictable, he wrote, was that the government denies the existence of fundamentalism. The dependency of foreign donors makes the country vulnerable. He regards it important not to risk foreign aid money by appearing to be a sanctuary for foreign fundamentalists.⁶⁰

Except the violence and threats from fundamentalism in the Bangladesh society, it is interesting to notice the priorities of the government. Johan Sidenmark writes that the prime minister of the new government in 2001, Khaleda Zia, in an official speech explained that the government are going to do everything to strengthen and modernize the army.

⁵⁸ Amberntsson, P. 2001. Ovanligt våldsamt val: Bangladesh minoriteter hårt utsatta både före och efter valet. *Sydasiens* nr 4. p 23.

⁵⁹ Majumdar, S. 2001. Hinduer flyr efter attacker från fundamentalister. *Sydasiens*. Nr 4. p 23-24.

⁶⁰ Litner, B. 2002. Upp till kamp – mot sekularismen!: Islamistiska grupper spelar allt större roll i Bangladesh. *Sydasiens* nr 4.

Sidenmark say that this may be a doubtful investment in one of the poorest country in the world, with an already strong army.⁶¹

The government has failed to contribute to development. Malin Arvidson got the answers from NGO workers that the bureaucracy with endless administration and a top-down approach contribute to the lack of results. The government also have the wrong attitude and are sometimes corrupt. There is a agreement that the government institutions do not have capacity and skills to conduct development work. Arvdison says that it is a well established fact that there is a gap between the people and the power.⁶²

Centre for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh argues that the government is facing a weakening of its authority. Further the Centre argues that the social forces which are making a positive contribution the development of Bangladesh are politically un-represented.⁶³

The described political climate is the everyday situation for the NGOs, wherein they are trying to reach development. Begum Rokeya declare it like this:

It is not possible to achieve anything if you do not cooperate with the government. We have to change politics, but the situation is tricky and vulnerable.⁶⁴

Roots of dependency and liberalisation of economy in Bangladesh

There is a history that lead to the present political situation of democratic fragility and dependency of donors. Bangladesh' economy is dependent on donors, 80% of its cost for development has been financed by foreign money.⁶⁵

Bangladesh was a rich area when the British arrived. During many hundred of years this delta landscape, with flooding which brought nourish with the mud, was among the most fertile areas in the world. Water transportation systems were early built up, and textiles were the most important products transported. The textiles from Bangladesh were very early known to be the best in the world and there was a big market. By the 18th century the manufacturing of textiles was one of the worlds largest industries. This industry however declined because the industrial revolution in England with "Spinning Jenny" killed the Bengali textile

⁶¹ Sidenmark, J. 2001. *Nya ledare, nya helgdagar*. Sydasien nr 4.

⁶² Arvidson, M. 2003. *Demanding Values, Participation, empowerment and NGOs in Bangladesh*. Lund: Dept. of Sociology, Lund University. p 118.

⁶³ Centre for Policy dialogue 2002: 122

⁶⁴ Interview with Begum Rokeya the 19th of February 2004.

⁶⁵ Website of the Hunger project in Bangladesh. www.thp.org/sac/unit5/aid.htm. 2004-05-20

industry. Under the colonial era the farmers were forced to be jute producers to foreign industries.⁶⁶ The colonial pressure was the beginning of “underdevelopment”.

There was a political unity of India, named the Indian empire, under British rule for nearly 200 years, with strong support of the Hindu elite communities. The British pursued a divide and rule policy between Muslims and Hindus. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Indian empire, was decolonised from Great Britain in 1947 after a long struggle for independence. To establish the decolonisation, the Independent Act was announced, creating two independent states, namely India and Pakistan. Present Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan and was first called East Bengal and later renamed East Pakistan. The states were conformed out of the dominion of the Muslims (Pakistan) and the Hindu (India). The hazardous attempt by the Pakistan government to introduce Urdu as a national language, only spoken by 3.5% of the population, by mostly upper class migrants from India lead to the beginning of a nationalist movement in East Pakistan. The Bengalis were denied their democratic rights, to join policy planning and to allocate resources. East Pakistan was exploited by West Pakistan. The sale of raw materials from East Pakistan was about 70% of Pakistan’s foreign exchange. East Pakistan had no use of this foreign exchange as this was used for development of industries and military in West Pakistan. 1971 Bangladesh was created out of a bloody Liberation War from Pakistan.⁶⁷ After liberation, there was a climate of chaos and famine in Bangladesh. The international community send Bangladesh huge amounts of foreign aid.⁶⁸

The first election under the constitution was held in 1973 and the Awami League won.⁶⁹ The economy was dominated by the private sector, and when the west Pakistanis fled the country there was abandoned industrial and commercial companies. The government lead by Sheik Mujibur Rahman had a socialist commitment and an approach of central planning and state intervention.⁷⁰ The Awami League nationalised 80-85% of the nation’s industrial, banking and insurance assets and business. Private and foreign investments were not encouraged.⁷¹ A military coup overthrew the government at 1975. Three months later there was another coup and 1977 General Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh National Party (BNP) had full control. Liberal economics were introduced and small companies were

⁶⁶ Berg, L. 1986. *Längs Ganges*. Stockholm: Ordgruppen. 195-197

⁶⁷ Ahmed 2002:47-51

⁶⁸ Website of the Hunger project in Bangladesh. www.thp.org/sac/unit5/aid.htm. 2004-05-20

⁶⁹ Ahmed 2002: 47-51

⁷⁰ Uddin & Hopper 2003: 741

⁷¹ Ahmed 2002:56

returned to their original owners and privatisation policy was conducted during 1975-1981. International lending Agencies and the World Bank developed a major influence on government. Again the government was overthrown, this time by general Ershad. He adopted the recommendations of privatisations of the state owned enterprises. Donor agencies tended to make loans facilities dependent on privatisation. 1991 BNP was reelected and followed the advices of the World Bank by liberalising the economy. When Awami Legaue again was in power the socialist commitment had declined, and the instead had continued the privatisation.⁷²

NGOs in Bangladesh and Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS)

There are about 25 000 local NGOs of different sizes active in the country. Many of these were started in the seventies by socially engaged Bengalese from the left intellectual middleclass. In the beginning they mostly worked with the immediate help that was needed after the War of Independence. But there were also disappointments about the political development, a commitment to do something for the poorest people evolved.⁷³ Designer Alan Flux, who has worked for NGOs since 1975 in different Asian countries, talks about the possibilities for development and the importance of NGOs in a dejected way.⁷⁴

It is very hard to see any improvements in this country, but everything would crash if it were not for the NGOs, as the governmental institutions do not do what there are expected to do.

That the governmental institutions on different levels do not do what you could expect of them seem to be a common opinion, as far as I noticed. To be the opposite of the declining government is the self-image and also the ground for survival, i.e. to gain foreign aid-money.⁷⁵ I believe that it is not only an attitude and a self-image but actually a fact that the governmental institutions are non functioning. Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) started in 1986 and is a local NGO which works with poor women, children, adolescents and disabled. Its overall ambition is to improve the quality of life of these groups. To meet necessary needs, SUS makes education, health service, micro-credits and exercises in socioeconomic

⁷² Uddin & Hopper 2003:741-742

⁷³ Linqvist, P. 2002. *NGO=Business? Om mikrokrediter och aid-business*. Monsun nr 4.

⁷⁴ Interview with Alan Flux 18th of February 2004. Alan tries to find patterns and products in villages suitable for the western market.

⁷⁵ Arvidson 2003:119

rights available. SUS considers it important to emphasize a gender approach, community participation and to work in collaboration with governmental and other relevant organization. SUS means that rights ensure sustainable development and that those rights are derived from values and that major elements of rights for example are “relation, respect, honour, equality, morality, demands, recognition, duties and responsibilities”.⁷⁶ SUS organisation is hierarchical, with an Executive Committee on top, then an Executive Director and under those five major programmes; Income & Employment Generation Programme, Initiative for Social Development Programme, Human Rights & Legal Services, Project Strengthening Unit and Finance and Administrative Support programme. Each programme has a Programme Director. In some cases there are also a Project Manager, Project Coordinator, Project Supervisor, Community Organizer and a Community Development Organizer.⁷⁷



Begum Rokeya, Executive Director and founder of SUS, Netrakona, 2004.
Photo: Jeanette Schlaucher

As described, SUS has several projects for improving life qualities of poor people. One of the projects is skill training for girls. Another project is micro finance projects for women (Further discussed in chapter *Women empowerment by micro-credit and skill training*). These girls are also trained to be REFLECT facilitators (further explained in chapter *Women empowerment using the REFLECT method*). Thereby they are trained in how to lead groups towards empowerment in the villages.

⁷⁶ SUS 2004:1

⁷⁷ According to organogram provided by SUS 2004

Women in Bangladesh

One moment in Bangladesh informed me more than any good written report would have done. We sat in front of a group of women in the REFLECT circle. A woman was asked to sing. She thought about it for a while and formulated the song in her head and then she sang.

I am a woman. But I have rights. I am a woman. But I could improve my life. I am powerful.
I am a woman. But I have rights. I am a woman. But I could improve my life. I am powerful.
I am not a woman! I am a man. I am not a woman! I am a man.

The woman had both discovered and improved her rights. She felt that she had power to make changes in her life. But she also felt that having rights and feeling strong is mentally equal to be a man.



The woman who sang the song, Mohongonj, Mymensingh, 2004.
Photo: Karin Lindgren

It is obvious that the situation for women, and notably poor women, in Bangladesh is very hard. When it comes to economics, legal status, education, health and power, women are in an inferior position. For example 26 000 women die every year in the country due to pregnancy-related complications. Less than 50 per cent of women use antenatal facili-

ties and more than 90 per cent of births take place in the home, mostly attended by untrained people. Before further investigating the specific problems a discussion of the roots of the problems would facilitate the understanding. Begum Rokeya's focus is the women situation in Bangladesh. From her own experience and with help of UNDPs statistics she summarizes the situation.⁷⁸

The woman in Bangladesh is like a bird in a cage. Women have no rights to express their rights. They have no mobility and could not even go to the market. Literacy is 18% among women and 45% among men. But with "Literacy" means that you could write your name, so the statistics is misleading. Women eat last and least, 60% of the women weigh less than 48 kg and their children get undernourished already during the pregnancy. According to UNDP statistics there are 23 millions of children between 0-6 years old suffering from vitamin D-scarcity. 60 000 of them are permanently blind. 100 children get blind every day due to the mothers situation of under nourishment. A healthy woman gets a healthy child. According to the law, the age of marriage is 21 for men and 18 for women. But the statistics show that in 12% of the marriages, the girls are 18-20 years old and in 51% of the marriages the girls are 15-18 years old.

One common understanding is that "tradition" is a problem for women in the Third world. When women in Sweden are beaten in their homes or have considerably lower wages performing the same work we never refer to these circumstances as "traditions". Uma Narayan, an Indian feminist, who refer to herself as an "Third World feminist", writes that it seem to be an assumption in Western public understanding of 'Third World that women's problems' that they are fundamentally problems of 'Third world women being victimized by Traditional Patriarchal Cultural Practices'. Narayan consider this assumption problematic. For example it obscures that many 'Third World women's problems' are rooted in modernization and social change produced by development policies that result in ecological devastation. The assumption that 'tradition' is the problem for the women in the Third world pays very little attention to the 'politics of tradition formation'.⁷⁹ Narayans opinion is important to remember when we want to analyse the roots of discrimination of women, even when the roots are found in tradition or religion, because the solution could be mostly political. Good governance might be a solution for discrimination between men and women independent of what the roots are. One example is the inheritance law, where the roots might be religion, but the solution probably political. The constitution of Bangladesh from 1972 grants equal rights for women in all aspects of life. In 1977 it was modified to remove the secularism and make Islam the state religion of the country. In some situations Muslim Law gives equal rights to men and women

⁷⁸ Part of a lecture held by Begum Rokeya at Jönköping - Bangladesh sister Community Association meeting at Jönköping the 25th of March 2004.

⁷⁹ Narayan, U. 1997. *Dislocating cultures, Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. London & New York: Routledge. p 60-61.

but in many others women have fewer privileges.⁸⁰ Project Manager for REFLECT and social mobilisation (the REFLECT method is further discussed in chapter *Women empowerment using the REFLECT method*), Achinta Muzumder explains the inequalities in the law when it comes to inheritance.⁸¹

Women are very discriminated in law. The law stipulates, that when a man dies, most of his assets go further on to the husband's male relatives. The wife only gets 25%. If a Muslim family has two children, a girl and a boy, they do not get equal assets, The boy gets 80% and the girl 20%. So the official law is very similar to the Muslim law. In Hindu law, not a single asset is handed over to the girl. The government has had no luck when they have tried to change the law, and they have been trying for 20 years. In other Muslim countries they have changed the law in favour of women, so it is possible.

As long as women are almost excluded from inheritance, there is little chance for women to accumulate capital as a group. But for a woman it is logical to give money to her son, as the daughter leaves the family when she marries. The son stays and can take care of her, when she is old.

Cannon has focused on women's vulnerability during hazards. Especially hazardous are cyclones, which could kill tens of thousands of people each time. To be poor is to be vulnerable, and the poorest are women. Cannon's point is that vulnerability in Bangladesh correlates strongly with poverty and women make up a disproportionate share of the poor (see chapter *The need for an alternative development*). As an example of poor people's vulnerability, Cannon mentions the fact that tropical storms of similar intensity affect USA and Bangladesh differently. In 1992 the hurricane Andrew struck Florida and caused damages worth 28 billion pounds, but killed fewer than 20 people. The year before, the similar cyclone that struck the south - east coast of Bangladesh killed 140 000 people. This is due to differences in social vulnerability. There are several reasons why women will suffer more from disasters than men. Their nutritional status and coping capacity are lower. Further, floods increase women's domestic burden, by i.e. their dependence on economic activities linked to the home. Poverty is as a key factor affecting the ability to provide self - protection, that is why women's ability to create protection during hazards is reduced. Women are also handicapped by fear of the shame attached to leaving home.⁸²

Women are also in a vulnerable situation due to early marriages. That is why some of the activities of SUS concentrate on early marriages. Project coordinator Tanjena

⁸⁰ Hamid, S. 1996. *Why women count, Essays on Women in Development in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press limited.p 87.

⁸¹ Interview with Achinta Muzumder on the 18th of February 2004. He has been employed by SUS since 1995 and worked for other NGOs 1993-1995.

⁸² Cannon, T. 2002. Gender and climate hazards in Bangladesh. *Gender and development*. vol.10, No.2.

Khan works with skill training for adolescent at SUS. She informed us about the improvements in the project for skill training.⁸³

With early marriage we mean that the girl is below 18 years old. Early marriage for boys is considered to be if he is below 21. In 2002 we had 10 early marriages in this area, in 2003 and 2004 we had not any early marriages.

Robert Jensen and Rebecca Thornton have investigated problems with early marriages in South Asia. A contract bounded by a child is not legal in most societies as young persons are less capable of understanding the implications of long term decisions and do not have the mental and emotional maturity required for taking such a decision. Jensen and Thornton consider it a problem of three main causes. First there are consequences for women's physical, mental and emotional development and well-being. Secondly the early marriages affect the health of both mother and child. An early age at first childbirth often means that physical growth and development is incomplete. Marriage is also a barrier for education as women are expected to leave school in order to take care of the home, the childbearing and later the child. Finally, Jensen and Thornton describe the problems with the age difference between wife and husband. When the woman is much younger than the man, she would have problems establishing her position in the household. As a result they have less power, status and autonomy. Women who marry young with elder men are more likely to be abused or physically threatened. The behaviour, attitudes and power relations that are formed early in marriage may persist over time.⁸⁴ Violence against women is well known within SUS and some of the girls that they take care of have had terrible experiences⁸⁵. Shamin Amid concludes that poverty is one of the main causes of violence against women. Lacking statistics she has informed herself from newspapers, which reports on violence such as wife battering, murder of wife, kidnapping, rape, physical assault, acid throwing and suicide. The most frequent causes of ill treatment of women are that the woman's family is forced to make a dowry payment of marriage, illegal relationships and property disputes.⁸⁶ De Vylder argues that there is a connection between class differences and men's violence against women. He claims that the position of the woman in the society, and the view of the man's role together with the width of the class differences settle how much violence there is in a society. This is, he says,

⁸³ Interview with Tanjena Khan the 19th of February 2004. Tanjena has been employed by SUS since 1998.

⁸⁴ Jensen, R. & R. Thornton. *Early female marriage in the developing world*. 2003. *Gender and development*, vol. 11, No. 2, 9-19. p 9-19.

⁸⁵ SUS has a shelter house for girls in an exposed situation.

⁸⁶ Ahmid 1996:94

showed in different studies. He also reminds us of that if problems in the society are solved with violence, violence is passed on to the homes. Men who have been involved in armed conflicts, use violence more often than other men, even during peace.⁸⁷ It is not difficult to notice that the society in Bangladesh is very hierarchical. Bosse Kramsjö, a Swedish NGO-worker, who has spent many years in Bangladesh, has observed the class society. He has examples from left wings radicals belonging to the middle class whose behaviour are so involved in the class system, that they do not recognize it around them, even if they discuss it with great enthusiasm.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ de Vylder 2004

⁸⁸ Kramsjö, B. 2000. *Bangladesh på upptäcktsfärd I verkligheten*. Dhaka: Shikkha Bichitra. p 127.

Possible strategies of achieving an alternative development

Now I will first discuss the background and mode of “participation” in the chapter *The inescapable participation*. What strategies do the staff in SUS use, they who are dealing with the everyday questions of poverty and marginalization of women? Are there strategies to develop societies and give the poorest women chances to improve their life quality. Are there strategies for an alternative development? In the following chapter “*The need for an alternative development*” I have suggested that the poor must themselves define their needs and take action for change. Finally I will then describe the strategies in the chapters *Women empowerment by micro-credit and skill training* and *Women empowerment by the REFLECT method*.

The inescapable participation

Chambers is a key figure behind the philosophy, approach and methods of Participatory Rural Appraisal. It evolved in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the major innovators and users based in NGOs. The principles have been elicited by trying out practises. Participatory Rural Appraisal is intended to enable local people to conduct their own analysis and often to plan and to take action.⁸⁹ Participatory Rural Appraisal is now commonly used as a natural way to emphasize local knowledge and enable local people to make their own appraisal, analysis, and plans. David Archer and Sara Cottingham from the development organisation ActionAid explain that Participatory Rural Appraisal is a reaction to the western model of modernisation approach to development. It starts from the lives of communities themselves, where people already have the knowledge necessary for change. The starting point is the collective construction of maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams on the ground using whatever material available (this is further explained in the next chapter). Though Archer and Cottingham consider Participatory Rural Appraisal being an approach not only a technique.⁹⁰ Chambers distinguish between two different approaches, one with the “core” first and one with the “peripheral or last” first, as defined in the table His main point is that “the new professionalism” reverses power relations – putting the last first, in choice of clients,

⁸⁹ Chambers 1992

⁹⁰ Archer, D & S. Cottingham. 1996. *Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowering Techniques*. London: Actionaid. p 13-14.

professional values, research methods and roles. The poor people must be the teachers and experimenters. Chambers summarize the division between “Core” and “Peripheral” in the table below.⁹¹

Core or First	Peripheral or Last
Power	Weakness
Comfort	Discomfort
Wealth	Poverty
Core Location	Peripheral Location
Urban	Rural
Industrial	Agricultural
Things	People
Clean, Odourless	Dirty, Smelly
Standardised	Diverse
Tidy	Untidy
Controlled	Uncontrolled
Certainty	Doubt

Table. Chambers division between Core and Peripheral or Last.

Malin Arvidson explains the mode of participation very well. She summarizes it with; a change from top-down to bottom-up approach, empowerment as aim of participation is crucial, the approach focuses on the poorest of the poor, that is women or ethnic minorities, encouragement to co-operate with NGOs rather than state bureaucracies and that local knowledge should be made to count. There are different ways to use participation, either as a tool or as an end. It could be ‘a management strategy through which the state attempts to mobilise local resources’ using it as an instrumental tool. Participation as an end is something completely else. Arvidson means that it “implicates empowerment of people to challenge structures in order to reach social justice, equity and democracy”.⁹² This is the bottom-up approach, when people themselves both analyse and solves the problems they are facing. To do this they must be provided with techniques. Empowerment could be, but is not necessarily an individual approach, the problems could be defined within an organisation or a committee.

Arvidson traces the use of ‘participation’ in the developmental discourse to the 1950s. She refers to Steifel and Wolfe and explains that in its early use it was perceived as a mode of modernization. Steifel and Wolfe writes ‘Popular participation then became a therapy

⁹¹ Chambers 1994:8-9

⁹² Arvidson 2003

to transform ‘backward’, traditional’, ‘unresponsive’ populations into citizens ready to assume their duties and seize their opportunities in a predetermined development process’. According to Arvidson participation was added to the “development formula” which was focusing on economic structures, state bureaucracy and technology. I asked the question to the interviewees if they could define a “good” and a “bad” (successful or not successful) NGO, and some answers were about participation. Monitor & Analyst at SUS Murshed Iqbal Rimu pointed out the importance of the discussions with the poor people and gave an example of what could happen if the participation failed:⁹³

There are other NGOs providing micro-finance, without discussing with the poor people. I know for example that one NGO gave a woman here in the neighbourhood money, after two months she got money from another NGO. The woman used the loan for her daughter’s marriage and failed to pay back the loan.

Achintan Mazumder has long experience from the participation technique *REFLECT* (this method is further discussed in next chapter *Women empowerment by the REFLECT method*). He thinks that every NGO has a good intention, they are working for the betterment for the poor. But not every NGO works with a bottom-up perspective. Achintan explains how SUS works:⁹⁴

In for example the Adolescent program we have to find out what is needed for the adolescents. The adolescents participate in the process and express their needs. We collect this information in the field and analyse it on organisational level. Some NGOs do not follow this bottom-up perspective, they do not focus on the poor peoples need and do not involve the participants.

Jibon Dey, Project coordinator for education at SUS confirms this picture:⁹⁵

A good NGO has a strategic plan and work with the participation of the beneficial stakeholders. They have transparency and accountability for beneficiaries. A bottom-up perspective is necessary. This perspective has 10-12 years of history. Sometimes it is only a written document and it is not used in practise.

Arvidson discusses that the state in Bangladesh has reduced its power as a driving force for development. She writes that maybe the focus on peoples participation was a consequence of the failures of the state, although the state and the governmental institutions have also actively

⁹³ Interview with Murshed Iqbal Rimu the 19th of February 2004. Rimu has been employed by SUS since September 2002

⁹⁴ Interview with Achintan Mazumder the 18th of February 2004. Achintan has worked with Reflect since 1997. He started in SUS 1995 and worked for another NGO 1993-1995.

⁹⁵ Interview with Jibon Dey the 22th of February. Jibon has been employed by SUS since 2001. He has experience for other NGOs since 1999. He writes in national newspapers about children’s rights, women and education issues.

embraced the rhetoric of participation. It is a way to strengthen their position. Referring to Rahnema and Bawtree Arvidson writes that “It has been used as a means for manipulating people into supporting authoritarian rulers, since calls for participation as a technique to gain approval and respect from both its own citizens and donor-society”.⁹⁶

Women empowerment by micro-credit and skill training

Strategies for “Empowerment” are often analysed in studies, but seldom defined. Empowerment is the process that promotes the self-actualisation in order to make individuals and groups to take necessary action to improve life quality. A woman that is empowered has control over decisions that affect her life. Shamim Amid thinks that *empowerment suggest an alternative development strategy* focusing on people and their environment rather than production and profits. The long term results she thinks are the rebalance of power in society by making state action more accountable, strengthening the powers of civil society in the management of its own affairs, and making corporative business more socially responsible.⁹⁷ To raise women’s economical situation and give them opportunities to have incomes and be more self dependent has been a strategy of alleviating poverty. Small credits called “micro finance” are given to women as a way of making it possible for them to invest in income bringing activities.

Micro finance has become one way of empowerment to significant numbers of women that are excluded from formal credit institutes.⁹⁸ SUS provides micro-finance within the project called “Income and Employment Generation Project”. In the picture below women from villages are coming to get their loans during a day that is previously decided. We visited the “extremely poor women” in Mohongonj, Mymensingh⁹⁹. We asked the women about what they used the credit for and what income activities they had. The women did not only get credit, but sometimes also were provided with extra help to buy for example a milk cow or something that could bring income. Since they are extremely poor it is impossible for them to buy a cow without this assistance. A certain amount of money the woman has sole power over

⁹⁶ Arvidson 2003

⁹⁷ Ahmid 1996:133

⁹⁸ Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2002

⁹⁸ Hunt, J. & N. Kasynathan. *Pathways to empowerment? Reflections on microfinance and transformation in gender relations in South Asia*. 2001. *Gender and Development* Vol 9, No. 1, 42-52.

⁹⁹ Visit villages in Mohongonj, Mymensingh, SUS project, 17th February 2004.

and the rest the man and woman take joint decision about what to do with the money¹⁰⁰. Some of the women told us about what they have done with the money.

I sell milk and I have a milk cow
 I have a dry fish business
 I have a milk cow. It brings me 45 Tk a day (20 Tk is less than 3 Swedish kr, my comment)
 I have a milk cow. It brings me 20 Tk a day, and my husband earns money, he is painting
 I have a milk cow. It brings me 22 Tk a day, my husband is net fishing, he earns 22 Tk a day
 I make baskets, my husband is carpeting
 I do metal and bamboo work

More activities are in the program, as teaching the women homestead gardening, they also join REFLECT circles. One woman in the REFLECT circle we visited, frankly declared.

Before I could not eat 2-3 times a day, but now I can and I send my children to school.

Micro-finance Programmes (MFPs) were advocated in the 1990s, as the single most important method for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.¹⁰¹ During the 1950s it was assumed that the poor were too poor to pay market interest rates and generate savings. In the 1970s in the women development discourse, women were encouraged to be integrated in the global process of economical, political and social change.¹⁰² When analysing empowerment and micro finance, it is important to keep in mind that micro-finance is one way of empowerment, it is single-dimensional, while “empowerment” is multi-dimensional. With Micro-finance means to give small loans after saving small amounts, preferably with the aim to invest in activities to get an income. It seems obvious that the strategy of helping women in this way would be a step forward. Micro-finance could be both individual and group based. The group based approach has the capacity to empower the most vulnerable and marginalized women, by creating a community-based structure.¹⁰³ Critical analysis however shows that gender situation is so complicated that a positive result is not evident. Juliet Hunt and Nalini Kasynathan reflects on micro finance and criticises the lack of serious analysis of the complex relationships between access to credit and increased status for women. Observations show that consideration must be taken to the understanding of gender issues and women’s rights and a commitment to equality for women of the NGO worker, clear messages from the

¹⁰⁰ Information from staff meeting in Mohongonj, Mymensingh 17th February 2004.

¹⁰¹ Website of Global Development Research Centre. Sabharwal, G. <http://www.gdrc.org>, *From the Margin to the Mainstream Micro-Finance Programmes and Women's Empowerment: The Bangladesh Experience*. 2004-03-31. p 1.

¹⁰² Sabharwal 2004:13

¹⁰³ Sabharwal 2004:12

NGO regarding the importance of women having some control over decision making, loan use and ownership of the income or asset generated and technical training that support women in managing and using the loan themselves, and that focus on increasing the productivity of their labour.¹⁰⁴



Women getting credit in SUS micro-credit program, Netrakona February 2004.
Photo: Jeanette Schlaucher

Helen Pankhurst, the Head of Women worldwide International Programmes Department gives attention to the structural problems, and that micro credits have limits in solving poverty problems. Structural problems could be intra-household relations of power and rights or inequalities at the global level. The structures that centrally affect people's economical situation are access to key resources as land, labour as well as capital. Sometimes micro credits could even increase women's poverty by demanding repayment. There is need for a more fundamental change in ownership rights in society.¹⁰⁵ Gita Sabharwal writes that "The social processes of MFPs strengthen women's self-esteem and self-worth, instil a greater sense of awareness of social and political issues, leading to increased mobility and reduced traditional seclusion of women. Most importantly, MFPs enable women to contribute to the household economy, increasing their intra-household bargaining power". She suggests an integrated approach where the process of institutional and legal change must be involved, because the link between credit and women empowerment is not all clear.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Hunt, Kasynathan 2001:50

¹⁰⁵ Pankhurst, H. *Passing the buck? Money literacy and alternatives to credit and saving schemes*. 2002. Gender and Development vol. 10, No 3. p 11-12.

¹⁰⁶ Pankhurst 2002:1

Pankhurst writes that the choice of economic activity is often narrowed down by traditional perceptions of the sexual division of labour. The markets for activities that are open to them tend to get saturated and profit margins are driven down.¹⁰⁷ Jackie Ross, Training and handicraft management Adviser, also work with training skill for designers, designing embroidery and garments. Ross, being an English NGO worker has reflections about the women's situation in Bangladesh and has also noticed the narrow market for women constrained by inequalities. She trains 12-18 years old girls. She attempts training design, so that they can design for a better market. Ross expresses her thoughts:¹⁰⁸

It is a hierarchical system. Young men are very spoiled. Women's rights are important as are the change of the big difference between rich and poor. But it is not easy to change. Women doing something in public is a progress. There is a woman down the street, she is ironing outside her house, making an income, I am very pleased with that. I would like there to be more activities for women in the society. Like food processing, activities that give women work experience at other places. There is a world outside for the women

Pankhurst's conclusion is that credit schemes do not work if it operate at the micro-economic level without giving attention to the macro-level reasons for poverty. She is convinced that work at the micro level must be undertaken with realisation that action for changes to national and international policies is required.¹⁰⁹

Women's mobility in Bangladesh is restricted, one reason is the use of the Muslim tradition of *purdah* (seclusion). For example visits to the marketplace is a male activity. It is claimed by NGOs that women's mobility are increasing as a result of micro credit. But extreme poverty and landlessness may be more associated with increased mobility beyond the village than micro finance program, as the poor women have to leave the village to sell products¹¹⁰ SUS works with increasing women's mobility as a necessary act for girls in embroidery training skill. Project coordinator for skill training for girls at SUS Tanjena Kahn explains how they work and the difficulties they meet working with the project:¹¹¹

We have maximum 57 girls and they come within 4 km radius. We pay 400 Taka a month to her mother. We take care of her mental growth. When they receive training we arrange markets, where they learn how to sell their products and how they should talk to the customer. When they have finished training they even dare to buy their own clothes. We have difficulties with the parents. The parents do not want their

¹⁰⁷ Pankhurst 2002:12

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Jackie Ross 21th of February 2004. Jackie has been working at SUS since 2003. She has experience in other NGOs for about 2 years.

¹⁰⁹ Pankhurst 2002:12

¹¹⁰ Hunt, Kasynathan 2001: 47

¹¹¹ Interview with Tanjena Kahn 19th of February 2004. Tanjena Kahn has been working in SUS since 1998. She works with skill training in five sections: embroidery, sewing, batik, bamboo and food processing.

daughter to go to the market. They worry about the girl's security and social position. Sometimes boys talk to the girl, this worries the parents. We arrange parent meetings so that the parents could discuss this matter with each other.



Girls in skill training at SUS, Netrakona, 2004
Photo: Jeanette Schlaucher

On the national political level there seems to be good policies, but severe problems with the implementation. A person, who wanted to be anonymous, informed me about the women development policy.

There is a women development government policy from 8 march 1997, and it is good policy. The problem is the implementation. There is a lot of work in policymaking and the new government will make a new policy, but the government does not share it with the people. There is no implementation.

Pankhurst is convinced that poverty eradication needs a more holistic approach. In her organisation Womankind Worldwide the strategy of the four literacies has emerged. The literacies are word literacy, money literacy, body literacy and civil literacy. With word literacy means reading and writing, gaining access to information, expanding horizons and unleashing creativity. With Money literacy means numeracy, basic economics, improved livelihood, entrepreneurship and economic rights. With body literacy means understanding your physical and mental health needs, confronting taboos and making decisions based on facts not fear. Womankind works on four levels: awareness raising, individual and community level support, capacity building of local organisations and policy work. By civil literacy means knowing and using your legal rights, participation in decision making, human rights and citizenship.¹¹² The development organisation Actionaid considers that literacy itself must be redefined in each

¹¹² Pankhurst 2002: 13

new context, and that literacy is a measurement of the nature of the relationship between people and the world in which they live.¹¹³

Women empowerment by the REFLECT method

To be “literate” is often defined as a person who owns the skill to read and write. But literacy could be defined otherwise. Archer and Cottingham developed the literacy programme REFLECT and define “literacy” as a way of: remembering, recording, representing reality and communicating across space and time.¹¹⁴ With this definition people who lack the skill to read and write could be literate with the three first definitions and even the ability to communicate across time. People who do not read or write do not lack the mentioned abilities to remember, but do this in an oral culture. Walter J. Ong writes about orality and literacy. Written language is not superior to spoken language culture, but different. However illiterate people are not ignorant, but the kind of knowledge that an illiterate person has is quite different from the knowledge of a literate person, even ways to structure thoughts are different. A literate person does not have a written *and* oral culture, as written and spoken languages represents different cultures of communication. For people from oral cultures, intelligence is not something one gain from books, but something to be used in an operational context.¹¹⁵

Archer and Cottingham are aware of illiterate people’s knowledge and exemplify it with knowledge to plant, care for and harvest a wide range of crops, how to tend different animals, build houses and make various crafts. Knowledge of formal literacy is not always a good or practical thing for people in rural communities. But there are few places in the world where literacy has not been introduced as part of the process of change. Where there is no demand or literacy, it would be wrong to force literacy upon people.¹¹⁶ Chambers use the *term rural people’s knowledge*. Much of this knowledge is located in people and only rarely written down. With “knowledge” he means the whole system of knowledge, including concepts, beliefs and perceptions, the stock of knowledge and also the processes whereby it is increased, stored and transmitted. The attitude where rural peoples knowledge is not taken care of, inevitably leads to a top-down approach. Real participation could only be reached with a humble attitude towards rural knowledge. An alternative development is only reached if the

¹¹³ Archer, Cottingham 1996:19

¹¹⁴ Archer, Cottingham 1996:9

¹¹⁵ Ong, J. W. 1996. *Muntlig och skiflig kultur, Teknologiseringen av ordet*. Uddevalla: Anthropos.

¹¹⁶ Archer & Cottingham 1996:9

people who are in an inferior position when it comes to life quality themselves formulate their needs. Chambers claim that in most countries in the third world rural people's knowledge is an enormous and under utilised national resource. He regards that the two types of knowledge; scientific, modern and rural, indigenous, could complement each other. For that to happen, power must shift and the bearers of modern scientific knowledge must come down from their pedestals and sit down, listen and learn.¹¹⁷

Participation though needs a useful method to render possible local action as a means for an alternative development. The REFLECT¹¹⁸ method is a participation method inspired by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and the methods of Participatory Rural Appraisal and evolved from three pilot projects in Bangladesh, El Salvador and Uganda. It is used for adult learning and social change.¹¹⁹ Freire created an idealistic ideology as the foundation for his pedagogy. The aim of the pedagogy is "liberation". He writes:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.

Freire means that the violence from "the oppressors" prevent "the oppressed" from being fully human. But in this oppression the oppressors themselves become dehumanized. So "It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors". The oppressors who join the oppressed in the struggle for liberation, bring prejudices with them, which include lack of confidence in the peoples ability to think, to want and to know. Freire means that a real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, than by actions in the peoples favour without trust.¹²⁰

I have written about that the poor, the oppressed, the illiterate, the poor women have knowledge useful in their own development. Freire observed that peasant called themselves 'ignorant'. He used knowledge from his practise to explain the circumstances;

Not infrequently, peasants in educational projects begin to discuss a generative theme in a lively manner, then stop suddenly and say to the educator: "Excuse us, we ought to keep quiet and let you talk. You are

¹¹⁷ Chambers, R. 1991. *Rural Development, Putting the Last First*. New York: Longman Scientific & Technical. p 93,191.

¹¹⁸ REFLECT=Regenerated Freieran Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques. Archer, Cottingham 1996

¹¹⁹ Archer, Cottingham 1996:6

¹²⁰ Freire, P. 1996 (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Middlesex: Penguin books. p 35-42.

the one who knows, we do not know anything". They often insist that there is no difference between them and the animals; when they do admit a difference, it favours the animals. "They are freer than we".

But Freire also noticed that this self-depreciation changed when the oppression changed.¹²¹ REFLECT started in 1993 when Action Aid began a two year research project, to explore the possible use of Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques within adult literacy programmes. The three pilot projects were evaluated and compared to other literacy programmes with significant results both with literacy and with linking literacy to a wider development. Action Aid believe that REFLECT circles could be catalysts for wider processes of change.¹²² SUS has been a partner of Action Aid since 1986 and was one of the pilotes projects in Bangladesh.¹²³ SUS started to use the REFLECT method in 1997, after noticing that programs rarely fulfilled their ambitions. Loans to women were often handed over to husbands and were not invested in income generative activities, as they were supposed to be. Women were only given access to the money so that they could make repayment requirements or make the savings according to the schemes.¹²⁴ REFLECT is not only about literacy, as literacy in itself does not bring significant benefits when it comes to health, productivity, community organisation and good governance. The reverse may be true, that persons being "healthier and wealthier" have had more access to education. REFLECT facilitators are therefore concerned with more aspects than literacy and take a wider analysis of development and involve 'Gender and Development'. Men and women are supposed to make individual and collective reflections so that they can address their practical needs. The method also challenge local oppressions by social status, gender and age that need structural change. But to challenge oppressions on international or national level could lead to frustration and more oppression. Achintan Mazumder explains the work of SUS with REFLECT:

Our aim is to regenerate freirian (from Paulo Freire, my comment) literacy through empowering community techniques. In the freieran literacy we use "liberating education" it means that people themselves create and think about how to achieve development. They are encouraged to analyse their problems. In all areas, in all issues, they themselves identify their problems. People jointly take decisions, and make critical analysis of their problems, after that they take necessary actions. It is possible to create a development in a democratic environment. People discuss very confidently. It is the development workers responsibility to create a good environment. And what is a good environment depends on the local situation. A good environment is a democratic environment where everybody joins the discussion, there is no imposing only respect¹²⁵

¹²¹ Freire 1996(1970):45-46

¹²² Archer, Cottingham 1996:6

¹²³ E-mail interview with Begum Rokeya 14th of February 2004.

¹²⁴ Nessa et. al 1998

¹²⁵ Interview with Achintan Mazumder the 18th of February 2004.

Practice in REFLECT is to draw a graphic and transfer it to a large sheet of paper. The completed graphic is then used for the introduction of reading and writing as well as numeracy work. The process is intended to lead to identification of local action for development. Different types of graphics can be constructed, these techniques comes from practitioners of Participatory Rural Appraisal. Examples of graphics that could be constructed are shown in the table.¹²⁶

Type of graphic				
Maps	Housing Maps , showing all the houses in the community, the number of people in each house.	Agricultural Maps , showing the location of different crops and changing trends.	Land Tenure Maps , represent the ownership of land.	Natural Resource Map , identifying access to or control of sources of wood or water, to lead into discussion of environmental issues.
Calendars	Rainfall Calendars , represents climate patterns and trends, can lead to discussion about responses to drought, floods.	Agricultural work Calendars , different activities associated with each major crop are plotted.	Gender Workload Calendar , represents the main activities of men and women plotted through the year and which can lead to very structured reflection on gender roles.	Health Calendars , local illness are identified and their relative occurrence through the year is represented
Matrices, charts	Crop Matrices , participants analyse each crop they grow against a set of criteria which they can decide for themselves.	Credit Matrices , involve participants listing the sources of credit that they have	Matrices of Households decisions , women could tabulate their involvement in discussing, planning and carrying out decisions in different areas of household life.	Health Matrices , participants describe the curative strategies they follow for different illnesses (herbs, medicine, healer, hospital)
Diagrams	Chapati diagram of Organisation , represent on a sort of Venn diagram where all the organisations in the community and external communities with influence ¹²⁷	Diagram of Informal Power Relations , explore the powerful individuals within the community and groupings, interrelationships and so on		

Table: Different kinds of graphics that could be made within a REFLECT circle. Actionaid 1996.

When we visited a REFLECT circle for women in a village in Mohongonj¹²⁸ they showed us examples of their graphics. It was a big chart where they had drawn every family in the village in their houses including latrines and kitchens, straw stacks, ponds and palms. It was an inventory of the village. They also had made a drawing of what resources they needed, like hospital, rice plantations and a market. Individually and in groups they

¹²⁶ Actionaid 1996.21

¹²⁷ Venn diagram: A graph that employs closed curves and especially circles to represent logical relations between and operations on sets and the terms of propositions by the inclusion, exclusion, or intersection of the circles.

¹²⁸ Visit in Mohongonj, Mymensingh District, 17th February 2004.

decided what they wanted to achieve within 3,6 and 12 months. Individually it could be a new house or more ducks and chickens. According to the REFLECT Mother Manual this is a “Housing map” (see photo from Mother Manual below). The objectives for this map is to discuss the history of the village; to show how syllables represent real sounds and to make words based on one key word (house); to introduce written number 1-5. In the themes for discussion could be; what different kind of construction there are for the houses, when the village was first settled, where people came from, are there stories from the early days of the village and so on. The ideas for action are based upon the discussion, but the members in the group decide what kind of action that should be taken. For example, if the discussion has focused on the styles on housing, the sharing of construction skills or collective work on a community building may emerge as action points.¹²⁹



Housing map from Mother Manual for REFLECT.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Archer, Cottingham 1996: 89

¹³⁰ Archer, Cottingham 1996: 94

The staff at Mohongonj told us about results:

We have started 20 REFLECT circles in 2003. The women have bettered their possibilities to achieve what they want. They think REFLECT is a good method, it's concrete and visible. The women see what they want and use the method themselves. What is difficult is to make planning for long-term action.¹³¹

Empowerment is maybe not a measurable conception in every angle, especially the more long-term implications. Anyway in 2003, SUS started 80 REFLECT circles, with 1600 selected members. About half of the members were selected from Micro finance and Micro entrepreneurship groups. With Micro entrepreneurship is meant small-scale income bringing activities, like the women have in Mohongonj, e.g. fish drying or bamboo handicrafts. In the annual report from SUS the REFLECT activities are described;

Through the participatory approach, participants are learning reading, writing, counting, being aware and taking initiatives for establishing rights. In fact exercising their acquired knowledge in the sphere of personal life, family and society, they have become more confident. [...]. As a result participants once who did not know how to apply traditional technique in preserving local seed, pest management, they are now applying native technique. [...]. Thus circle participants are playing an effective role in terminating drug, gambling and all kinds of violence and discrimination against women. [...]. , they also arrange arsenic test campaign ensuring safe water. [...]. They are implementing several action points, e.g. compost preparation, using contraceptives, participation in decision-making, involving income generating activities etc. [...]. Now they are aware of their local resources and they have access to the local resources. [...]. Learning reading, writing, counting and becoming aware on different issues, they can read simple books, can express themselves clearly, can count up to 1000, can do simple addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. They can teach their pre school children

I asked Begum Rokeya if SUS had any unexpected results out of REFLECT. She answered:

Yes, there are. When people become aware and realise the reasons of their poverty, unfair distribution of resources, injustice or discrimination, they act accordingly, they go to the local government for their children's school to ask for quality system of education, they ask for good road communication, they protest against unfair means in stipend distribution, old age benefit distribution, relief distribution etc.¹³²

When I asked Begum Rokeya about if it is possible to make changes if political situation do not changes, she answered:

In a way I can say that until politics change nothing changes. We think it is possible. It is possible through educating people with proper knowledge, make people aware by proper participation, training people with and change their skill, knowledge and attitude. We think that when people will be able to create their ownership and commitment towards their family, society and community, then politics will also be positive towards mass people. Of course it is a long process for us. But we are hopeful for our future. Perhaps at this moment we could put a seed to the peoples mind which will help them to at least initiate

¹³¹ Staff meeting in Mohongonj, Mymensingh district, 17th February 2004.

¹³² Interview with Begum Rokeya by e-mail the 15th of March 2004.

interaction. Later on they will participate to change the role of destructive politics. So I must say that people are a source of power.¹³³

Personal stories also give some qualitative information about results. Nessa et. al refer to a woman, called Jahan Ara from the Islampur slum in Netrakona. When the story was told, she was 36 years old and she was making a living by rolling small cigarettes from local tobacco. She joined a REFLECT circle, because her dream was to teach her own children, read letters from her parents, avoid being cheated by shop keepers, read signs and addresses in the city and understand her bankbook. She reported the most valuable outcomes of the REFLECT process. She could understand alternative ways of improving her economic status, she could run a small business, keeping accounts and monitoring profits and she could improve the health and hygiene of the family environment. What happened was that Jahan Ara took a loan to invest in a rickshaw with her husband, she now visits relatives and neighbours and regularly goes to the hospital and market alone, feeling confident about orienting herself around town and she has also been able to actively support a local candidate's campaign in the recent election.¹³⁴

It is not easy for poor people to demand their rights, though. In a report from the organisation ActionAid Bangladesh it is said that poor people rarely engage in collective action for the demand of public land, fishing ground, forests etc. They fear a violent backlash, which they believe they have little power to resist. That is why they need support from those who has power.¹³⁵ Julie Koch Laier, discuss problems in her research of participatory gender research. As an example she mentions complicated power relations within the local society. According to her, it could be difficult to follow the principle of Participatory Rural Appraisal methods that the power and control should be in the hands of the participators.¹³⁶

The title of this essay is "The dream of the extremely poor woman in Bangladesh: Strategies of Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) as an example of achieving an alternative development in Bangladesh". Maybe somebody wonders what the dream of the woman is. Well, the dreams we have are dependent on the position we are in, at the moment we make the dreams up. A realistic dream could be a plan. Of course a poor women's dream

¹³³ Interview with Begum Rokeya by e-mail the 15th of March 2004

¹³⁴ Nessa, F., R. Begum & A. Mazumder. 1998. *REFLECT, savings and credit in Bangladesh*. PLA Notes. Issue 32, pp.54-56, IIED London.

¹³⁵ Website of Actionaid in Bangladesh. ActionAid Bangladesh Annual Progress Report 2001. www.actionaidbangladesh.org/index2.htm. 2004-05-19

¹³⁶ Koch Laier, J. 1999. Et problematisk parforhold: Diskussion af deltagerorienterede tilgangen til kønsforskning. I *Veje til Viden: Nye metoder i feltbaseret udviklingsforskning*. Nyberg Sørensen, N. ed. København: Handy-Print Print A/S. p 49.

in Bangladesh could be a good marriage for her 13 years old daughter. But a woman made aware of possibilities and given chances would have dreams more constructive to her and her daughter's well being. In the adolescent program of SUS young women have been taken care of. They are almost children, without possibilities in their homes, or they do not have homes, they have been abused and some of them are young mothers. Karin Lindgren asked them about their dreams.¹³⁷ The dreams were very similar. One of the girls, Shufia Akter answered: "I will be independent after learning this work. I want another life for my child, which I will provide her. I will support all her education and she will become an ideal woman". The woman on the front page is a leader of a group of extremely poor women in a village in Mohongonj. From the look of her face, we can guess that she is quite empowered. I never asked her about the dreams. But I would like to guess that improvement of her and her family's life quality when it comes to food, shelter and education are in those dreams. Being a leader, she probably have dreams for what the group could achieve, claiming their rights.

Concluding discussion

My thesis was that a bottom-up perspective, with a focus on participation of the poorest women and women empowerment is a successful and necessary strategy to reach a development for the poor. Examples are strategies used in SUS. I have described three strategies; skill training for girls, micro-credit for women and the REFLECT method for the poorest women. Remember the Michel Foucault thinking of power relations. The institutions and groups mentioned in this essay, are connected to each other in a complicated infrastructure of power - relations. It is not obvious that the World Bank has more power than the poor women. When the poor women achieve positive changes, demand their rights, they perform and manifest power towards the government or towards existing ideas of women's inferior role. Richard Chambers had a different idea of power, a more traditional, where power could be located. His ideas do not however exclude the Foucault's idea that power manifest itself in acting. Chambers considered it as a "new professionalism" when the power - relations were reversed, "putting the last first". In Paulo Freire's ideology about the oppressor-oppressed - relation, "the oppressor" also has to be liberated. "The oppressed", compared to "the last" in Chamber's terminology can liberate "the oppressor". This is also an idea of a reversed power - relation. Foucault would perhaps not locate the power and suggest a reversion of the relations,

¹³⁷ Interviews by Karin Lindgren of seven adolescent girls at SUS shelterhouse in Netrakona the 20th of February.

but suggest that power is everywhere. In chapter *Women in Bangladesh* I introduce a woman who sings a song about her empowerment. Empowerment by REFLECT is not only a tool for becoming literate and make reasonable plans for the future. An additional advantage is the personal feeling of power. I suggest that power to make changes for the women is everywhere on every level. Begum Rokeya's wise notion that "people are a source to power" makes sense in the context of women empowerment. Julie Koch Laier, noticed the problem in the micro - level problems in her research. She mentions complicated power relations within the local society. It could be difficult to follow the principle of Participatory Rural Appraisal methods that the power and control should be in the hands of the participators. This means that the NGO worker must take power and control of the techniques, and that the ideologies of Chambers and Freire are not easy to perform in reality. This does not mean that techniques or programmes for empowering poor women do not help them to take action and improve their lives. It means that power could manifest itself in many ways and in many relations, as explained in Foucault's philosophy. Foucault's notion is also that the power could be transformed through different social practices. I think that participatory techniques could be a way to learn practices of how to use power. The thesis that a bottom-up perspective, with a focus on participation of the poorest women and women empowerment is a successful and necessary strategy to reach a development for the poor is complicated by the fact of the complicated power - relations of: facilitator, poor women, NGO, government and macro-level (global) politics. Still the strategies used in SUS; skill training for girls, micro-credit for women and the REFLECT method makes a difference for many women and families. A bottom - up perspective with focus on the poorest women are necessary, but not enough.

I have described the macro development discourse dictated by the western values, WTO and the World Bank. The development has not led to improvements for the poorest, some claim that the development has made the situation worse and that there is a link between the rich centre and the poor peripheries in the world. I agree that there has to be another development, one problem is the overuse of resources and environmental destruction. Another problem is that we have not erased poverty on this earth. I consider that the WTO locks countries and regions in *one* detailed economical model, which limit the possibilities for local politicians to perform other economical politics. There is enough proof that the overall paradigm of growth economy and the structure designed by the WTO is a discourse that will not help the poorest. There is no sensitivity of the negative impact on women in this development discourse and there is no gender approach. The feminisation of poverty and marginalization of women as a result of modernisation and introduction of western technology in agri-

culture in Bangladesh is a result of this development discourse. Micro-credit programs have been criticised. Monitor & Analyst Murshed Iqbal Rimu, who explained that failure in micro-credit is a failure in the participation process. At a lecture in Lund Bosse Kramsjö defended the micro-credit for poor women. He said that with micro-credit programs poor women without assets got possibilities to take loans for the first time in history and they pay back better than rich people and they have shown that they are entrepreneurs.¹³⁸

Training women in traditional activities within the female domain has been criticised. Braidotti et.al. thinks that the approach of engaging women in typical female domain activities, such as sewing, knitting, different types of handicraft and mother and child health care could be ongoing without challenging “gender relations and patriarchal structure in the society”.¹³⁹ Braidotti et.al. could be partly right in this argumentation. However there are several results within SUS in this field that do challenge gender relations and patriarchal structure. First SUS can see results of hindering girls to go to early marriages. As Jensen and Thornton describes, beside the problems with the declination of the woman’s health in early marriages, she would have problems establishing her position in the household. I think that if the woman’s position towards the man in the household is bettered, her position in the society is easier to establish. The second is that the girl gets an income and an education, which increase her status and possibilities for development of herself. The third is that her mobility is widened, as she sells products at the market, a traditional area for the men. The Muslim tradition of women seclusion from the society, the purdha is challenged. When the market is saturated, the girl could get problems selling her products. On the other hand, she has already crossed several barriers, and crossing one more and trying another activity might be easier from this position than from the position from where she started. SUS combined the skill raining for some of the girls with REFLECT training, which is empowering and a challenge for the girl. This empowerment will probably make it easier for her to take on other activities if necessary.

In last chapter I describe the REFLECT method for empowering women to be literate and to take action for changes. In challenging what “development” is and trying new ways of both defining and achieving changes that make difference for the poorest women, the REFLECT method has found a way. Poor people demand their rights, getting interested in politics and make claims for change within their village and in their lives. On the other hand to expect women in vulnerable positions to act politically could be cynical, and dangerous for

¹³⁸ Lecture by Bosse Kramsjö in Lund at the Swallows the 11th of February 2004.

¹³⁹ Braidotti et.al. 1995: 78

them. Acting to achieve rights in a society like the Bengalese is challenging a corrupt and hierarchic system. Involvement in politics must be based on personal conviction. Empowering women is necessary, successful and ethical right, but very difficult under declining governmental responsibilities. It is not enough to empower women if the government does not take responsibilities. Pressure from the middle class and from foreign aid agencies must be headed against governments on different levels if national politics should be changed. There are also hopes about that the poor women, empowered by REFLECT will involve themselves in politics on local level and make necessary changes, expressed by Begum Rokeya. The problem with the WTO claims for a neo-liberal agenda is a challenge for activists, intellectuals and journalists in the rich world and in Bangladesh. The macro level politics on the global and national arena which marginalize poor, must be changed and permit space for local politics. To perform politics of its own is though very hard when there is a dependence of the macro politics, as WTO agreements. A declining government is more dependent on the macro level politics. On the other hand, with a bottom – up perspective on politics, the Foucaultian combined effects of “micro – powers”, the acting of villages and by local NGOs could be transformative up to macro level.

The government and governmental institutions have failed to reach development in Bangladesh. The NGOs has taken over tasks, which normally are governmental duties. Empowerment of women will never reach its full opportunities if politics is not changed. It is easier to fulfil the women’s wishes, if there is a functioning administration. But even under existing circumstances good results has been achieved by SUS. Micro-credit and skill training are activities for the empowerment of women, for development of the society and makes a positive change in poor peoples lives.

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List of abbreviations

FAO	Food and Agriculture organisation of the United Nations
IMF	International Monetary Found
LDC	Least Developed Countries
MFP	Micro Finance Program
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
REFLECT	Regenerated Freieran Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques
SUS	Sabalamy Unnayan Samity
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WTO	World Trade Organisation