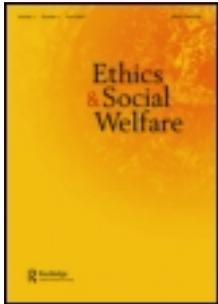


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# Empowerment, Citizenship and Gender Justice: A Contribution to Locally Grounded Theories of Change in Women's Lives

*Naila Kabeer*

*Struggles for gender justice by women's movements have sought to give legal recognition to gender equality at both national and international levels. However, such society-wide goals may have little resonance in the lives of individual men and women in contexts where a culture of individual rights is weak or missing and the stress is on the moral economy of kinship and community. While empowerment captures the myriad ways in which intended and unintended changes can enhance the ability of individual women to exercise greater control over their own lives, it does not necessarily lead to their engagement in collective struggles for gender justice. This paper argues that ideas about citizenship, as both legal status and potential for action, can help bridge this gulf between institutional and individual change. It draws on empirical research from Afghanistan and Bangladesh to explore the extent to which efforts to empower women by development organisations have also encompassed discourses of citizenship which allow them to articulate, and act on, their vision for a just society.*

**Keywords** Gender Justice; Empowerment; Citizenship; South Asia; Development Organisations

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with the relationship between empowerment, citizenship and gender justice. I see these as signposting distinct but interrelated pathways of social change in women's lives which can, but do not necessarily, overlap. I understand women's empowerment to have an irreducibly subjective component. Whatever else, it must entail changes in women's consciousness, in the way they perceive themselves and their relationships with others. It thus begins with

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individual change. Gender justice concerns the institutional arrangements that govern society including, but not only, its legal system—and the extent to which these promote the fair treatment of men and women. Struggles around gender justice are then struggles around notions of fairness at the institutional level. I will be arguing that ideas about citizenship offer an important bridge between these two processes of change because they help to mediate the translation of individual notions of selfhood into socially recognised identities.

In formal terms, gender justice refers to international norms and conventions relating to women's rights as well as various forms of national legislation seeking to promote gender equality. While there are various factors behind this emerging architecture of rights, a major driving force has undoubtedly been the efforts of feminist activists who see the formal recognition of women's rights as a critical pathway to substantive gender justice. However, legal gender equality has not necessarily translated into gender justice where it matters most: in the everyday life of millions of men and women, most of whom have not taken any part in these efforts and many of whom may not even know that they exist.

At the same time, various intended and unintended forces have been acting on some of the long-standing patriarchal constraints that limit women's agency in everyday life: these include rising levels of education, increasing rates of labour force participation as well as a variety of development interventions, many targeted explicitly at women such as microcredit, cash transfers and reproductive health. Yet, as various studies have shown, women's individual empowerment has not translated everywhere into greater awareness of their rights or greater willingness to act on them.

This paper explores how interactions between women's empowerment, citizenship and struggles for gender justice play out in societies in which ideas about gender equality and women's rights have very shallow roots because individuality itself as a way of life has little or no place. I begin in the next section by discussing efforts to formulate these concepts in ways that take account of the challenges posed by such contexts, starting with my own effort to conceptualise women's empowerment.

## Empowerment, Citizenship and Gender Justice: Conceptual Approaches

My definition of empowerment takes choice as its central concept (Kabeer 1999). I defined empowerment as the processes of change through which those who have been denied the capacity to exercise choice gain this capacity. However, I qualified the notion of choice in a number of ways to make it relevant to the analysis of empowerment.

My first qualification related to the conditions in which women make their choices. For choice to be meaningful there have to be alternatives, the possibility of having chosen otherwise. My concern here was with women's apparent compliance with, or at least failure to protest against, norms and values which

assigned them an inferior status to men in their society. Such compliance can be variously interpreted. It may reflect an unquestioning acceptance of these norms and values, the belief that they represent a satisfactory, even valued, way of organising social relationships. It may reflect the material costs associated with protest. Where women are economically dependent on those with power and authority over them, attempts to question the status quo can undermine their primary source of survival and security in their society. Or there may be social costs. If there are strong pressures within society to conform to given norms and values, transgression risks harassment or ostracism.

There is also the question of perceived alternatives. To what extent is it possible for women to *conceive* of having chosen or acted differently? In societies where gender inequalities of personhood are so deeply embedded in the family and kinship relations, so intimately bound up with constructions of the self as gendered subjects, that to question them would be to question the meaning of one's existence, there is little scope for imagining other ways of organising social relations. This touches on Bourdieu's idea of *doxa*, aspects of traditions and norms that are so taken for granted that they take on a naturalised and unquestioned quality.

Two other qualifications related to the consequences of choice. The first concerned the distinction between trivial and significant choices, between the choices that we make on a mundane basis every day of our lives and the more strategic life choices that have profound consequences for the quality and direction of the lives we are able to lead.

The second related to the consequences of choice for the broader structures of inequality that prevail within a society. To what extent do the choices in question undermine, and even transform, these structures, and to what extent do they merely reproduce them? Choices which embody the fundamental inequalities of society, which systematically devalue the self or undermine the capacity for choice of others, are not compatible with most feminist understandings of empowerment, however active the agency underlying these choices may appear.

Let me now turn to O'Neill's work (1990) for a conceptualisation of gender justice that attempts to take account of the kinds of patriarchal constraints that I am talking about. O'Neill seeks to steer a course between the idealised and relativist approaches which have dominated recent debates on this topic. Idealised approaches, exemplified by much of liberal theory, claim universalism by abstracting from the particularities of persons, such as gender or ethnicity, in favour of the abstract individual as bearer of rights and responsibilities. The problem with this conceptualisation of the individual is that it idealises a free-floating agency that is more easily exercised by men than women because it assumes away the relations of dependence and interdependence which are central to the lives available to most women in the real world.

Relativised approaches, exemplified by much of communitarian theory, explicitly acknowledge differences between people and seek to ground ideas about justice in the discourse and traditions of actual communities. The

objection here is that most communities relegate varying portions of women's lives to the domestic sphere. Not only do such approaches fail to take account of women's productive capacities and the practicalities of earning a living that many face but they also endorse the exclusion of women from precisely that 'public sphere' where questions of justice are generally addressed (O'Neill 1990, p. 440).

O'Neill believes that a more adequate account of justice requires abstract principles that are genuinely universal, that steer a course between abstractions that smuggle in idealised accounts of the human agent and context-sensitivity that ends up valorising culturally specific ideals about social relationships. The challenge is to articulate principles of justice that can adjudicate between the inevitably diverging views about desired or acceptable institutional arrangements that prevail in most societies. Justice requires that the basic principles for organising institutional arrangements in the face of such divergence must be ones that could be adopted by any plurality of these diverse actors. This would rule out deception, coercion or violence as the basis for organising social life since anything which promotes the agency of some groups at the expense of others cannot be universally acted on. The institutional arrangements that are adopted by all members of such pluralities on the basis of these principles then become the background conditions for their actions.

To illustrate the applicability of this approach to justice to concrete situations, O'Neill considers the situation of poor women in poor communities. How do we judge whether existing social arrangements that isolate or exclude women or ensure their life-long vulnerability violate principles of justice? This is not a question about the kinds of arrangements that hypothesised rational and mutually independent individuals *would* consent to, the idealised approach, nor is it a question about the kinds of arrangements that people in potentially oppressive situations *do* consent to, the relativist approach. Instead, it is a question about the kinds of arrangements a plurality of interacting agents with finite capacities *could* consent to.

O'Neill suggests that one way to capture what is at issue is to ask: to what extent are the different aspects of any arrangements that structure the lives of oppressed groups ones that '*could have been refused or renegotiated by those they actually constrain*' (p. 455; author's emphasis)? Institutions can only be regarded as just if they allow those who are affected by them the ability to refuse or renegotiate different aspects of the tasks and roles assigned to them. However, O'Neill recognises that the capacity for dissent is not evenly distributed in an unjust society. Existing institutional arrangements frequently undermine women's agency by making disproportionate demands on them to meet the needs and defer to the wishes of others and by limiting their capacity to think and act outside given norms and values. We consequently cannot take their failure to protest against existing institutional arrangements as evidence that these arrangements are just. There is therefore a processual aspect to justice: it requires building the capacity of subordinate groups to play an equal part in

shaping the institutional arrangements that govern their lives, including their capacity for dissent.

Ideas about agency—the capacity for choice, consent, renegotiation as well as dissent—are thus central to the conceptualisations of empowerment and gender justice that inform this paper. But while empowerment takes the consciousness and capabilities of individual women as its starting point, gender justice is concerned with the quality of the institutional arrangements that govern social relationships. I would like to suggest that ideas about citizenship can provide an important conceptual bridge between individual and institutional change.

There are, of course, many different ways of conceptualising citizenship, not all of them equally compatible with the kinds of agency that we are talking about here. For instance, liberal conceptualisations of citizenship based on the equality of the rights of individuals as recognised by the state and protected by law suffer from the limitations that O'Neill discusses. They privilege individual rights but take no account of how particularities of identity and social position might differentiate the ability to realise rights. Communitarian understandings focus on the shared norms and values which underpin the mutual responsibilities of the members of a community in pursuit of the collective good. But they also lend themselves to the defence of long-standing hierarchies within communities which give little or no voice to subordinate groups in defining what constitutes the collective good.

My aim here is not to adjudicate between different approaches but to draw on the conceptual resources they offer in order to propose the idea of citizenship in different contexts as *work in progress*, an ongoing project that evolves through struggles and contestations between different groups within a society. I want to explore these struggles and contestations through what Lister (1997) describes as the dialectical relationship between citizenship as *status* and citizenship as *practice*. Drawing on her distinction, I will be using the concept of 'status' to refer to how the existing constitutional/legal arrangements in a society define the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, including its gender dimensions, while I will use 'practice' to refer to the different ways in which members of a society seek to act on—and challenge—these collective definitions. While the status of citizenship spells out the possibilities and constraints that individuals and groups experience as members of a particular society, the practice of citizenship places the question of human agency, including the capacity to accept, to conform, to question or to dissent, at the heart of contesting views about citizenship.

### Contestations around Gender Equality and Women's Rights

Let me turn next to some examples of communitarian perspectives on women's rights and gender justice to illustrate what I believe to be their limitations. My first example comes from Menon (2000) who uses her research on upper caste

Brahmin women in urban Orissa to reject the universalist assumptions underlying feminist demands for 'equality, individual rights and personal choice' (p. 77). She suggests that the failure of (Westernised) Indian feminists to energise Hindu women to fight gender injustices, or even to protest against them, reflects the fact that such demands are rooted in 'an ideology of individualism' which has no traction for women she researched.

According to her, the women in her study consider themselves complementary, not subordinate, to men. They gain their deepest sense of who they are through their ability to fulfil the destiny of marriage and motherhood laid out for women in Oriya Hindu culture. As a result, many of the practices that feminists have identified as manifestations of patriarchal control are actively embraced by these women in their efforts to live up to twin cultural ideals of self-denial and service to others which define their roles as mothers and wives.

Menon illustrates this claim with a discussion of the practice of female seclusion among the Hindu upper castes. She points out that Hindus believe the human body to be relatively unbounded and permeable and hence subject to continuous change and reconstitution through contacts with others. Upper caste Hindus therefore observe various daily practices and rituals through which they seek to 'refine and regulate' themselves. Since women's bodies are considered more permeable than those of men—because they menstruate and reproduce—they are more concerned than men with regulating exchanges with others who could threaten this process of refinement (p. 81).

Consequently, the women in Menon's study choose to remain within the family compound, restricting their social interactions to family and kin and meticulously observing the prescribed daily practices of ritual purification:

Strange as it may sound to modern ears, Oriya Hindu women do not desire to move and interact with people indiscriminately. They value, positively, their lack of geographical mobility and their limited interaction with the outside world, interpreting these features as signs of their superiority over others, of their independence of the outside world... To shun contact, to maintain exclusivity, confers a mark of distinction on the person who shuns. (p. 88)

Barakat and Wardell (2002) also question the universality of individual rights, this time in the context of Afghanistan. They argue that those unfamiliar with Afghan culture tend to take women's absence from the public domain as evidence of their subordinate status but overlook the private domain of family and kinship where Afghan women find their primary source of security and status and exercise most influence. To look at Afghan society through a Western feminist prism fails to take account of the concepts and obligations that underpin women's power within the family and the role of patriarchy in providing them with shelter and security. The revered status of women inscribed in the local culture is upheld by Qu'ranic teachings and by Afghan women themselves. Regardless of differences of ethnicity, location and class, women's roles as wives and mothers are central to their identity: 'No matter how vital a woman's

economic contribution to her family's well-being, this remains of secondary importance to her position as wife and mother' (p. 918).

Both papers thus reject individualised notions of personhood. Both strongly emphasise women's association with the domestic domain as well as the satisfaction and status they receive from it. Both, however, are flawed by their treatment of culture and community as seamless, timeless and internally coherent. Neither allows for the possibility that any of the women within these cultures might feel oppressed by the predetermined nature of their roles in society and seek to protest against, however silently, their lack of choice about the lives they lead.

A somewhat different perspective on communitarian constructions of identity and personhood is to be found in Joseph's analysis of kinship and family relations in Lebanon (1994, 1997). She notes that the rights of citizenship embodied in the Lebanese constitution played very little role in the lives of men and women in the working-class neighbourhoods of Beirut that she studied. Instead, both men and women experienced their rights as emerging from sets of relationships within which they were embedded as concrete persons rather than as abstract individuals. These 'relational rights'—she borrows the term from Nedelsky (1993)—had a strong gender dimension. The relationships in question constructed gender identities through socialisation processes that stressed *interdependence* rather than *separation* as the basis of gender roles and responsibilities for *both* men and women. Consequently, they promoted connective notions of selfhood for both, 'one that [saw] itself embedded in others and foster[ed] relationality as a central charter of selfhood' (Joseph 1997, p. 86). Notions of selfhood were thus constituted by claims and obligations generated through, and embedded within, the social relationships of kinship, family and community. Nor was this relational understanding of claims and obligations confined to the domestic domain. Rather, they pervaded all domains of social interaction, rendering irrelevant the idea of an impersonal public sphere in which individual citizens enter as bearers of rights, equal in the eyes of the law.

But while Joseph also questions the relevance of liberal notions of individual rights in the context of her study, and emphasises the 'relational' basis on which rights operate, she is clear that these relationships are rooted in, and reflective of, a highly patriarchal organisation of family, kinship and community. This clearly has problematic consequences for women—as individuals and as citizens. It means that in both the private and public spheres of life they must defer to patriarchal authority figures who mediate their access to valued private and public resources. We might also add that the near-dominance of kinship relations, idiom and morality in all spheres of life means that the only discourse available for the expression of dissent from the patriarchal norms and values of kinship is the discourse of kinship itself.

Despite variations in their recognition of power as an aspect of gender relations, all three papers underscore the conundrum that motivates this paper. How do struggles for women's empowerment and gender justice take place within communities in which the patriarchal relationships of family and kinship

not only define gender roles and identities within the domestic domain but also provide the dominant model of relationships in all spheres of society? It is not simply, as Kandiyoti (1988) suggests, that women in such contexts may actively resist individual rights if these are seen to undermine the traditional protections that accompany their dependent status within the family. It may also be the case that they simply do not view these social arrangements as *unjust*. As Basu argues:

The internalisation of norms over generations means that subjective perceptions about inequality and subordination need have no connection with an outsider's views on these matters. And nor is it clear that one view is more real than the other. (1996, p. 56)

Such views pose a major challenge for feminist concerns with women's empowerment and gender justice as conceptualised in this paper. Recognition of injustice must clearly precede struggles for justice, but if injustices are ingrained in the social relationships that construct women's sense of self and security within their communities then they are likely to be ingrained in women's gendered subjectivities. Is it possible for women to recognise and deal with the injustices embedded in the social relationships that define their identities and give meaning to their lives without at the same time negating or undermining these relationships?

One way out of this conundrum is provided by Benhabib (1992). She notes that a central insight of Habermas's theory of justice is precisely the importance of social relationships in the construction of identity and consciousness: 'The "I" becomes an "I" only among a "we" in a community of speech and action. Individuation does not precede association; rather it is the kinds of associations we inhabit that define the kind of individuals we become' (p. 71). However, she goes on to argue, acknowledging the value and significance of social relationships in people's lives is very different from the uncritical and socially conformist acceptance of their ascribed 'station and duties in life' that features in some of the communitarian literature.

However socially embedded women—and men—may be in the ascribed relationships of family, kin and community, it is in principle possible for them to attain a reflexive distance from these relationships, to become simultaneously observers of, and participants in, their own society. If it is through the 'given' relationships of family and kinship that women gain their sense of identity and personhood, then it is through participation in other 'chosen' forms of associational life that they may be able to acquire a reflexive vantage point from which to observe and evaluate these relationships.

What is appealing about this conceptualisation is that it implies a sense of self and identity that is not predetermined and fixed by cultural norms but shifting and fluid, in constant process of construction and reconstruction through the social interactions of everyday life. It is, of course, possible that the expansion of associational possibilities leads to the reinforcement of old orthodoxies or the rise of new ones, to the substitution of dependency within the home for

exploitation at work. But equally, it is possible that it will strengthen women's capacity to recognise and articulate what they consider to be unjust about their lives, to decide what action to take and through their actions come to formulate their vision of gender justice.

This offers a different route to 'relational rights' to the communitarian version that Joseph describes in the context of Lebanon. If, as Nedelsky has suggested, the rights recognised by a society reflect collective choices about the kinds of social relationships it seeks to foster, then the inclusion of previously marginalised groups in the processes of collective decision making may serve to recast the vision of community and redefine the collective good along very different lines to that embodied in the prevailing status quo.

In the remainder of this paper I will be drawing on the findings from two of my recent research projects to illuminate some of the ways in which expanding the sphere of women's social interactions can bring about positive changes in their lives, even in apparently oppressive circumstances, and to evaluate these changes through the conceptual framework outlined in this paper. The women interviewed in both contexts spoke of familial relationships in terms of a patriarchal contract rooted in religious beliefs and cultural traditions. Men were the family breadwinners and guardians of its honour while women were responsible for bearing children, caring for the family, looking after the household and upholding the family honour through their virtuous behaviour.

Development NGOs were the key form of 'chosen' associations on which the research focused and both projects used women's accounts of their life histories to assess their experiences. The first project was based on interviews carried out in Kabul in 2009 with 12 Afghan women and their families (Kabeer *et al.* 2011). They were all from the minority Hazara community and came from poor and lower middle-income households. The women were associated with two development NGOs which provided microcredit to women. Such NGOs are relatively new in Afghanistan and both had started operations in Afghanistan within the previous five or six years.

The second project was based on interviews carried out in 2006 with 31 women drawn from low-income households in rural Bangladesh (Kabeer 2011). These women were associated with four development NGOs, all committed to a lesser or greater extent to women's empowerment, with one providing microcredit and the other three using a savings-based approach. NGOs have had a long history in Bangladesh and many of these women had been members for 10–15 years.

### Women's Narratives of Change in Urban Afghanistan

The Hazara women in our study were very explicit in articulating their views about the contractual basis of family life. They prioritised their duties to the family and looked to men to prioritise theirs. They remained within the vicinity of their own homes and were generally accompanied, sometimes by children, if

they had to go further. The virtuous woman, in their view, complied with these norms and accepted her husband's right to beat her if she failed to do so. In return, she could expect to be provided for, protected from harm and represented in the public domain.

However, the lived reality that the women described rarely matched up to this idealised version. High levels of male unemployment in a war-disrupted economy made it difficult for men to live up to their obligations as primary breadwinners, leading them to vent their frustrations on their wives and children. Almost every woman in our sample had experienced violence, usually at the hands of husbands. Their struggles to deal with the marked disjuncture between the normative model of the patriarchal contract and its concrete manifestations in their daily lives spelt out some of the forces of continuity and change that have characterised Afghan society in recent decades.

There were clearly a variety of pressures on women to put up with their situation, regardless of how they felt: the weight of tradition, their own adherence to its values, the authority exercised by dominant family members, pressures imposed by the wider community combined with their fear of losing their children in case of divorce, of being sent back in shame to their parents' home were all powerful forces in reinforcing the status quo.

Men too found the burden of breadwinning responsibility difficult to deal with. The stresses they faced could be glimpsed in their own descriptions of their struggles to earn a living and in women's frequent descriptions of husbands as 'bad tempered', 'moody', 'anxious' and 'tense', often combined with an understanding of their frustrations: 'poor him, he has to work from morning till night'; 'poor him, he lost his job'.

However, husbands' behaviours were not only explained as individual aberrations but also as manifestations of a more generalised pattern of injustice that gave men a monopoly on rights and privileges. These women did not subscribe to some monolithic notion of Afghan values. They distanced themselves from the values of the Taliban, for instance, resenting the impositions that it had placed on men and women, particularly from the minority Hazara community. Nor were their expressions of dissatisfaction confined to life under the Taliban. While they did not reject the norms and values of their own communities, they felt a keen sense of injustice that recurring violations of their contractual obligations by men went unnoticed, unpunished and even condoned.

This ability to take a critical stance towards their own society was in part a product of some of the changes that they had lived through in recent years. For some, time spent as refugees in Iran had provided an alternative vantage point, an 'observer status', from which to evaluate their own society. That it was also an Islamic state meant the comparison carried greater weight. One woman contrasted the treatment of women in Afghanistan to what she had observed in Iran: 'Iran is really good from this point of view. You can't put pressure on women. Here they look on women as a slave.'

For others, the experience of life under different kinds of regimes had helped to crystallise the importance of some of the freedoms that they had previously

enjoyed and that had been suspended for a period of time, including some degree of mobility in the public domain, the ability to watch TV, to vote, to work, to visit their shrines and to send their daughters to school.

Along with the restoration of these freedoms by the present regime, there had been other changes. Key among these was the emergence of a new legalistic discourse around gender equality and women's rights, actively promoted by the international community and by their own aid-dependent government. Both women and men learnt about this evolving discourse from their televisions, their forays into the public domain and their interactions with each other. TV, in particular, had become an important vehicle for conveying competing discourses about women's place in Afghan society: the discourses of religious leaders combined with educational programmes about women's rights and Indian soap operas which opened a window into women's lives in countries not far away from their own.

There were conflicting views among the women in our sample with regard to this emerging discourse of rights. Some regarded the idea of equality with men as a direct contravention of their fundamental beliefs: how was it possible for women to go out of the house without their husband's permission? Others questioned men's monopoly of power within the 'moral economy' of the community and the absence of any mechanism to restrain their misuse of their privileged position. They welcomed the emergence of alternative forms of jurisdiction, exemplified by constitutional and legal recognition of gender equality, as a means of holding men accountable for their actions and offering some redress to the inequalities of the patriarchal contract.

Given the turbulence of recent decades, it is not surprising that the changes associated with women's access to microfinance appeared relatively minor. In addition, the efforts made by the microfinance organisations to gain acceptance within the community, the absence of any forms of support apart from the provision of credit, and the failure to nurture stronger associational bonds among their members all curtailed their transformative potential.

Nevertheless, where households had made successful use of these loans not only did they experience improvements in their standard of living but it was also possible to discern some of the less tangible gains associated with ideas about individual empowerment outlined above. As the main conduits through which this new resource entered their households, there were reports of greater voice and influence in their households as well as greater respect within their local community. Association with microfinance organisations also served to widen women's sphere of social interactions: through meeting with other women from their loan group, through visits to the NGO office or, in the case of the woman who had set up her own businesses, through daily interactions with their customers: 'The hairdressers is the best place to have a chance to talk to other women like myself. Everybody has their problems especially because Afghan men are so cruel.'

However, there was little evidence that access to microfinance had strengthened women's voice in the wider community or their capacity to act collectively against the injustices they spoke of so eloquently. This may change with the next generation. It was striking how many women in our small sample were using the

meagre resources at their disposal to educate their daughters in the hope of carving out what we termed an ‘inter-generational pathway of empowerment’ (Kabeer *et al.* 2011).

### Women’s Narratives of Change in Rural Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a long history of development NGOs, dating back to the aftermath of independence in 1971. While many began with a very radical analysis of the structural roots of poverty and focused on mobilising landless men and women, they have become gradually de-politicised over time, taking on an increasing service provision role, with many specialising in microfinance. The focus of our research was on four rural organisations that had retained a commitment to social change. Their strategies had a number of elements in common. They all stressed the importance of strengthening women’s material position: through micro-credit in one case, group-based savings in the others. They emphasised the need for cognitive change through organised training and informal discussion. Also, they sought to build up relations of solidarity between group members in contrast to the instrumental ‘group liability’ approach which motivated conventional microfinance organisations.

The women’s narratives offered important insights into the processes through which individual empowerment translated into greater awareness of rights and greater willingness to struggle for them. They explained their past failure to act in terms of their fear of its consequences but also in terms of its inconceivability: ‘We did not protest even where there was lots of injustice and oppression in the village. We were afraid of the chairmen, village leaders and members. Moreover, we couldn’t even see any reason to protest. After all they are our village leaders, we used to honour them.’ Or as another woman put it: ‘We did not realise that we were human beings as well.’

The changes that have taken place since then occurred through a number of different routes. Women made a number of material gains through their savings, borrowing and training activities. These were by no means sufficient to allow them to leave difficult relationships but they did expand their scope for renegotiating them. They were less dependent on male earnings, more able to contribute to the household income and no longer had to rely on patron–client relationships that had provided them with some measure of security in the past but on very demeaning terms.

Change also took cognitive forms. The organisations in question offered practical training on livelihoods as well as opportunities for reflection and analysis. The awareness that the women gained through their interactions was transformative in its impact. They learnt to recognise the value of their unpaid contributions to the family and to demand such recognition from others. They learnt about arbitration and conflict resolution which in turn strengthened their

capacity to make reasoned judgements rather than relying on given norms. They learnt about their status as citizens and what it meant to be an active citizen.

In addition, the women spoke of the value they attached to the relationships that they had formed through their group activities: 'One stick can be broken, a bundle of sticks cannot.' Group-based solidarity was purposively nurtured by the organisations through regular face-to-face interactions between group members, collective savings, periodic cultural events and participation in various forms of collective action to claim their rights and protest against injustice. In a society where women are expected to observe cultural norms of female seclusion, similar to those reported in Afghanistan, such public action represents a remarkable change.

Women used their newly developed capabilities to organise around a range of issues. Within the economic domain, they participated alongside men in struggles over unclaimed government land to which landless groups had legal entitlement but which had been forcibly occupied by powerful land owners. In the policy domain, they carried out the informal monitoring of government programmes for the poor, protesting against examples of corruption and unfair distribution. They had also become more active in the political domain, campaigning for pro-poor candidates during elections and, in some cases, contesting local elections.

When it came to injustices in the domestic domain, however, responses were more ambivalent. Women's groups took a strong stand against public forms of violence against women, including rape and acid attacks, and against a range of institutionalised practices, such as dowry and child marriage, which they regarded as the unacceptable face of patriarchy within the family. But in relation to actual instances of patriarchal injustice in their own lives or in the lives of women they knew, their approach was more conciliatory, marked by greater willingness to compromise.

One way to understand this disjuncture is in terms of the continued centrality of family in social life in Bangladesh and the near universality of marriage. Even if these women had managed to gain much more on the economic front, there is still very little social space in rural Bangladesh for them to set up their own independent households to escape abusive marriages. Most opted to remain within marriage, but renegotiate its terms.

### Discussion of the Narratives

These narratives from Afghanistan and Bangladesh speak directly to the concerns of this paper. Firstly, they illustrate the variety of intended and unintended ways in which women's agency can be enhanced. The Afghan context offered striking examples of the unintended consequences for gender relations that have been generated by the rapid succession of regimes, with very contrasting views about women's place within society, as well as by the accompanying displacements from countryside into towns and neighbouring countries. Currently, purposive

efforts on the part of state, donors and civil society to transform gender relations compete with the equally purposive efforts of conservative forces to resist such transformation. Such contestations had served to open women—and men—to the possibility of different ways of organising society and different models of gender relations.

In Bangladesh, a great deal of change has happened as a part of ‘normal’ development efforts, not necessarily intended to empower women. Nevertheless, the promotion of family planning and girls’ education as a part of government policy, the emergence of new economic opportunities for women in the export garment sector, the proliferation of NGOs targeting women for various forms of service provision and greater exposure to the media have all helped to expand the associational possibilities and life choices available to women.

Secondly, even within the small and relatively homogeneous samples of women that were studied in the two countries, there was considerable variation in how they viewed the institutional arrangements that governed their lives, particularly the relations of family and kinship. Their views ranged from an unquestioning acceptance of the existing arrangements as ‘given’ by religion and culture to qualified criticism based on the perceived abuse of men’s power to a more radical questioning of a system that gave men near-monopoly of power and decision making without holding them accountable in any meaningful way. While few of the women in the two studies came close to the full internalisation of cultural norms reported by Menon, neither did they turn their backs on the familial roles ascribed to them by their culture. What they sought instead was to renegotiate these roles in ways that respected their contribution to the family, gave them a voice in family affairs, expanded options beyond the family and challenged men’s arbitrary use of violence. The pathways of change they sought were, in other words, ‘path dependent’, not crafted in a historical vacuum but shaped in important ways by inherited norms, values and institutions.

And thirdly, the two studies demonstrate how the different ways in which ideas about citizenship are disseminated in different contexts can influence the extent to which processes of individual empowerment translate into the ability to recognise and act on structural injustice. While women in both contexts are seeking to exercise a greater degree of agency in their own lives, it was the very different routes through which they became aware about their status as citizens in the two contexts that shaped the politicisation of this agency.

Women in our Afghan sample learnt about citizenship in almost accidental ways, only tangentially related to their association with development NGOs. Migration to Iran brought a number of them into contact with a very different kind of Muslim state, but it is worth noting that it was not differences in the practice of Islam in the two countries that featured most prominently in their narratives but differences in state effectiveness. Their time in Iran showed them what a functioning state looked like, its capacity to provide roads and electricity to its citizens and a police force that responded to women’s complaints about domestic violence.

Within Afghanistan itself, while there were considerable restrictions on women's freedom of movement in the public domain, exposure to television and interactions with women beyond the confines of kinship through their economic activities and association with microfinance organisations had brought about a greater awareness about an emerging discourse of women's rights in the public domain. None of the women in our sample had ever sought to actually take their grievances to the newly established Independent Commission of Human Rights, but some viewed its presence as a restraint on men's misuse of their power.

The Bangladesh story was very different. Here women had acquired a greater say in their own lives and relationships as a result of the purposive strategy of organisations that also sought to transform them into active citizens. With the support of these organisations, women were able to use their knowledge of their rights as citizens to counter unfair verdicts issued by informal justice mechanisms within their communities, to bring to light the corrupt practices of government officials and to challenge the efforts of local elites to exploit their labour. Their successes on these fronts in turn strengthened their sense of citizenship, making it more difficult for men in their families and local power holders to violate their rights with the kind of impunity they had enjoyed in the past.

### Conclusion

While the varying efforts of women in Bangladesh and Afghanistan to renegotiate rather than reject the patriarchal structures that governed their lives raise important questions about the universality of values of individual rights and personal choice, they also throw doubt on ideas about justice that are grounded in some unchanging and internally coherent notion of 'community'. If liberal arguments for justice are premised on false universalism, the cultural relativist case rests on an equally false essentialism. Both accounts need to be historically grounded.

Liberal ideas about individual rights did not always exist in Western societies. They emerged in the course of their transition from communities based on custom and relational constructions of personhood to communities based on contract and individualised notions of personhood (Fraser & Gordon 1994). While both Bangladesh and Afghanistan are societies in which family and kinship continue to play a dominant role in structuring social relations, they are also societies undergoing considerable change. In both contexts, we are seeing a gradual transition from doxa to discourse as some of the taken-for-granted aspects of social life are opened up to re-evaluation through the prism of alternative possibilities. In listening to the voices raised by women to protest against the unfairness of patriarchal structures as they have experienced them, we do not have to choose between an authentic local voice and an imported Western feminism. These are voices of protest grounded in local experience and

articulated in local idioms in societies which are not hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world.

In her measured responses to Western claims to 'save' Afghan women from patriarchal oppression, first through invasion and then through development, Abu-Lughod (2002) raised the question that others cited have also raised: are emancipation, equality and rights part of some universal discourse of justice to which we must all subscribe? She suggests that there may be other values, such as closeness with family and cultivation of piety, to which women in different parts of the world may give greater priority: 'they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language' (p. 788). While her concerns are addressed to the neo-colonial attitudes to Muslim women she has encountered among many Western feminists, the research cited in this paper reminds us that Muslim societies are not internally homogeneous: different pathways to personhood can co-exist within them. Gender justice surely requires societies that can accommodate these multiple pathways, the pious and the secular, the individual and the collective, without necessarily privileging one or negating the other.

In any case, the search for gender justice cannot be divorced from the larger question of social justice. Gender is not the only source of injustice in a society. Oriya Brahmin constructions of gender and family life position the women in Menon's sample as the privileged caste in an oppressive caste hierarchy in which men and women occupying the lowest position are deemed 'untouchable' because of the lowliness of their birth. The various practices that Oriya Brahmin men and women undertake to 'refine' themselves by regulating their contact with the outside world also represent their efforts to protect themselves from polluting contact with the lower castes. Women's active compliance with these practices serves to defend and reproduce both caste distinctions between the higher 'twice born' castes and the unclean lower castes and gender distinctions that see women's bodies as more polluted, and polluting, than those of men.

The fact that individualism in the *ontological* sense, the claim that a society is made up of atomised individuals and is no more than the sum of these individuals, has little traction in societies such as those discussed in this paper does not rule out the value of an *ethical* individualism, the recognition that certain basic rights and duties are defined in relation to the individual and rests on the equal humanity of all individuals (Robeyns 2003). A commitment to the fundamental equality of all individuals on the grounds of their common humanity is perfectly compatible with a worldview that recognises the connections between people, the socially embedded nature of their identities and experiences. It must also be fundamental to any understanding of justice.

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