

PAID WORK, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

Transforming the structures of constraint



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

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**PAID WORK, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH: TRANSFORMING
THE STRUCTURES OF CONSTRAINT**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



UN WOMEN/ANINDIT ROY-CHOWDHURY

A woman works alongside men in her West Bengal fishing community.

1. Objective of the report

A recent review of econometric studies into the relationships between gender equality and economic growth distinguished between those that explored the impact of gender equality on economic growth and those that explored the impact of economic growth on gender equality. It concluded that there was persuasive evidence to suggest that gender equality in education and employment contributed to economic growth. This effect appeared to work through a combination of the impact of gender equality on overall labour productivity in the economy and its impact on children's health and well-being within the family, and hence the productivity and well-being of the next generation of workers.

The evidence for the reverse relationship—the impact of economic growth on gender equality—was weaker and less consistent. However, a tentative finding worth noting from this latter set of studies was that the impacts of economic

growth on different aspects of women's lives were most likely to be positive in contexts where economic growth was accompanied by rising levels of female education and employment. The enhancement of women's agency associated with education and employment appeared to be pivotal in helping to translate changes in the broader structure of opportunities into positive changes in women's survival chances, well-being and rights.

Such findings suggest a dual rationale for promoting women's access to economic opportunities: it has transformative implications for different aspects of women's lives and it contributes to the pace and inclusiveness of growth. However, given the high levels of aggregation at which the econometric studies were carried out, they provide little insight into factors such as the kinds of employment or levels of education that are most likely to be conducive to women's empowerment in different contexts. Nor do the studies describe what kinds of policy regimes and patterns of growth are most likely to generate these enabling opportunity structures.

This report seeks to address this knowledge gap by drawing on household survey data collected in Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh as part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Partners' Consortium. The Pathways surveys were not designed to explore the linkages between economic growth and women's economic activity, both paid and unpaid, but rather took women's empowerment as a valued goal in its own right and set out to investigate the circumstances under which women's access to valued economic resources were likely to be empowering. Nevertheless, in the light of the macro-level finding regarding the likely impact of women's economic activity and education on growth, the Pathways analysis can provide more detailed micro-level insights into the 'resource' pathways that enhance women's agency and thereby contribute to the inclusiveness of the growth process. This report brings the Pathways household survey data together within a unified comparative framework in order to carry out a historically grounded and contextually located analysis into the extent to which the structure of economic opportunities generated by a country's growth strategies translated into positive impacts on women's lives in three very different contexts.

An all-female Bangladeshi police contingent arrives in Port au Prince to help with the reconstruction in quake-devastated Haiti.



UN PHOTO/MARCO DORMINO

The Pathways analysis can provide more detailed micro-level insights into the ‘resource’ pathways that enhance women’s agency and thereby contribute to the inclusiveness of growth.

2. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework adopted for the research took the capacity for choice and agency as central to its understanding of women’s empowerment, but recognized that this capacity was exercised within the ‘gendered structures of constraint’: the limits imposed by the structural distribution of rules, norms, resources and responsibilities that served to position different groups of women and men within the broader social hierarchies of their societies. This conceptualization of women’s empowerment not only encompassed women’s choice and agency as individuals, but also extended to their capacity to undertake action to challenge the gendered structures of constraint that curtail the life choices and life chances of different groups of women.

It is recognized that these gendered structures varied considerably by context. For example, the predominantly patrilineal-patriarchal-patrilocal structures of family and kinship in Egypt and Bangladesh, together with strict restrictions on women’s mobility in the public domain leading to historically low levels of female labour-force participation in both countries, meant that they shared important features of their gender relations. In Ghana, by contrast, matrilineal kinship systems coexisted alongside patrilineal ones, but both ascribed an important role to women in the productive sphere. Indeed, Ghana has been described in the literature as a region of female farming. While this description oversimplifies the considerable variations in women’s productive roles that exist in Ghana, it does serve to capture the prominent contributions that women make to the household economy.

At the same time, there is no reason to believe that family and kinship systems, and the gender relations to which they give rise, are impervious to change. They are constantly acted on, modified and transformed by a variety of forces. Some reflect purposive action on the part of different actors within the institutions of state, markets, civil society and within families themselves. Others may be the unintended consequences of such action as well as reflecting larger changes occurring at local, national and international levels.



A woman holds up her new National ID card in the Banha District, Qalyoubia governorate of Egypt.

The three country case studies provide a useful comparative framework for examining the interactions between pre-existing structures of constraint in different contexts and these broader forces of socioeconomic change. Each of the three countries began its post-colonial history committed to a nation-building project based on import-substituting industrialization combined with a socialistic policy discourse and commitment to redistributive welfare policies. Each abandoned these policies in favour of a broadly neo-liberal policy package along the familiar lines laid down by the Bretton Woods institutions, including public-sector cutbacks, state-owned enterprise privatization, trade and finance liberalization, exchange rate reform and labour market deregulation. However, each country started from very different initial conditions, undertook the transition to market-oriented policies at a varying pace and achieved varying degrees of structural transformation.

This report provides a brief account of each case study country's policy regimes prior to liberalization and explores how these mediated the implementation of the neo-liberal policy package and the structure of opportunities that they generated for women and men. The report then draws on the survey data collected for the pathways research to examine the implications of these opportunity structures for different aspects of women's lives: their economic agency within the household, their participation in community affairs and politics and their attitudes and perceptions in relation to issues that have a bearing on women's empowerment. Along with different kinds of employment opportunities—formal and informal, work within and outside the home/farm, self-employment and wage employment—the impact of women's education, access to residential land/housing and participation in associations of various kinds was also explored.

3. Empirical findings

EGYPT

Egypt started out and has remained wealthier than Ghana and Bangladesh, although in recent years its growth rates have declined and its poverty levels have risen. Since the 1970s, the oil economy has played an important role in shaping Egypt's growth trajectory, partly through domestic production but more importantly through employment opportunities in oil-rich countries in the region. Not only did these opportunities largely benefit the male labour force, but also the accompanying appreciation of exchange rates served to curtail investment in the more labour-intensive manufacturing and agricultural sectors that might have generated jobs for women. Where women did benefit was through the state's use of its considerable rental income to finance a massive expansion of social services and public-sector employment. Generous and gender-aware provisions in public-sector employment made the state the primary source of employment for middle class women in Egypt and created a strong incentive for female secondary and higher education. However, the successive military regimes that held power in Egypt since the 1970s remained highly authoritarian, discouraging the growth of an independent civil society and an active women's movement. While the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 ended this phase of the country's history, the extent to which it signals the end of authoritarian rule is as yet unclear.

The collapse in oil prices in the mid-1980s forced a period of efforts, led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), of economic reform, including retrenchment of the public sector. As a result, women lost out on one of the few sources of decent employment available to them. At the same time, social constraints on women's geographical mobility combined with private-sector employers' discriminatory attitudes such that economic privatization largely benefited men. There has been a gradual increase in rural women's labour-force participation in recent decades, but it remains largely confined to home-based self-employment or unpaid family labour.

Analysis of the Egypt Pathways survey found a positive correlation between both women's education and public-sector employment and a range of empowerment indicators. Somewhat weaker, but still positive, correlations were reported between women's informal self-employment outside the home and many of the dimensions of empowerment included in the survey. While a positive correlation was also reported between women's membership in organizations and their voting behaviour, the results were confined to women who worked in the public sector and whose voting behaviour could be seen as indicative of the state's influence rather than of an enhanced political agency.

GHANA

Ghana started its post-colonial history with a brief and successful period of import-substituting growth strategies. It then went through a period of major turmoil, which nearly precipitated its economic collapse. It was forced to turn to the World Bank/IMF for assistance in the mid-1980s. The ensuing

A store clerk accepts delivery in Ghana.



WORLD BANK/ARNE HOEL

structural adjustment policy package helped to put the country back on track, instituting a period of steady growth accompanied by a gradual reduction in poverty. The political environment also improved considerably, and there was a proliferation of civil society organizations, including women's organizations.

Despite their high rates of economic activity, women in Ghana do not appear to have been major beneficiaries in the country's growth strategies. They were largely excluded from industrial growth during the import-substituting industrialization period. Further, women that did find steady, public-sector jobs were laid off in disproportionate numbers during the structural adjustment period. The layoffs occurred without offsetting gains in the sectors that were prioritized in the shift to market-led, export-oriented growth. The minerals and timber industries were almost entirely male-dominated sectors, and while female labour is critical in cocoa cultivation, women in Ghana work largely as unpaid family labour in what is regarded as a 'male' crop. Within agriculture, women are largely self-employed in food crop cultivation, where earnings are lowest. However, a sizeable percentage of working women in Ghana have diversified into non-agricultural self-employment, largely in the informal economy. They appear to have fared better here than in other occupational categories, with higher earnings and lower gender differentials in earnings than in most other occupations open to them in the informal economy.

The Pathways survey in Ghana suggested that both formal employment and non-agricultural self-employment had stronger correlations with the various indicators of women's empowerment than women in informal waged employment, farm-based self-employment and the economically inactive. Education, particularly secondary education, was the other variable to have consistent positive correlations with the empowerment indicators, while women's ownership of residential land/housing and membership of organizations proved less consistently significant. As far as membership of organizations was concerned, while women have greater freedom of association in Ghana than Egypt, the majority of women who reported such membership in Ghana belonged to a religious organization. Given that many empowerment indicators relate to forms of change unlikely to be of primary interest to religious organizations (and in the case of reproductive choice, may actually go against the teachings of some religions), it is not surprising that membership in religious organizations did not appear to have a significant relationship with empowerment.

The case studies of Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh provide a useful comparative framework for examining the interactions between pre-existing structures of constraint in different contexts and the broader forces of socioeconomic change.



BANGLADESH

Shortly after its independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh abandoned its import-substituting industrialization strategy in favour of a market-led growth strategy. However, its growth rates did not begin to rise until over a decade later, partly assisted by declining rates of population growth. This was accompanied by a gradual but steady decline in poverty. Though the country made the transition from an extended period under military rule to a multi-party democracy in the early 1990s (followed by political decentralization in the late 1990s), its thriving development non-governmental organization (NGO) sector dated back to the early years of independence and had played an active role in the grass-roots provision of services, particularly microfinance.

Female labour-force rates were low and had remained stagnant for much of the import-substituting industrialization period. Despite quotas for women in public-sector employment, they never accounted for more than a small fraction of such employment. However, women were visible beneficiaries of the shift to market-led growth because they made up the dominant labour force in the newly established export-oriented garment industry. They also benefited, though less visibly, from expanded state and NGO activity in community-based service provision, including health and education, while their preferred status as microfinance beneficiaries explains their rising involvement in unpaid family labour/self-employment.

Analysis of the Bangladesh Pathways survey found that, as elsewhere, women's formal/semi-formal employment had the most significant associations with empowerment indicators. However, in the Bangladesh context, women's involvement in informal paid work outside the home was also positively associated with a range of these indicators. Educated women in the survey, particularly those with secondary and higher education, also reported positively on the various empowerment indicators, while membership of organizations (almost invariably development NGOs) also appeared to matter in the Bangladesh context. Since the impact of the microfinance function of these organizations on women's economic activities has been controlled for, it is likely that the positive impact of organizational membership reflects its associational and educational aspects. In addition, ownership of residential land and housing also proved to have a positive correlation with a number of empowerment indicators.

Bangladeshi women are often employed in the garment industry, with jobs ranging from hand-dyeing textiles to operating knitting and sewing machines.

4. Economic growth and gender equality: insights from the study

While the findings from the Pathways analysis varied between the three countries, in part given the differences in their gendered structures of constraint, there were a number of commonalities in their initial economic conditions and subsequent development trajectories. In all three countries, formal employment has had the most transformative impact on women's lives, with the state playing the most important role in providing this form of employment. Throughout the period under study, Egypt experienced higher rates of economic growth than Ghana and Bangladesh. Employment in the high growth sectors, mainly associated with the oil economy, largely favoured male employment. State investment in public-sector employment did help to overcome some of the constraints on women's mobility in the public domain, but the private sector remained largely inhospitable to women.

Ghana's growth rates were much lower than Egypt's, and were spearheaded by forms of production (minerals and timber) from which women were largely excluded, and from export crops in which women participated as unpaid family labour. Women in Ghana did benefit from public-sector employment, but the size of the public sector and the share of women's employment in the sector were much smaller than in Egypt. However, in as much as women were able to find lucrative forms of off-farm self-employment, they were able to exercise a greater degree of agency over their own lives and within their communities than those in farm-based self-employment.

In Bangladesh, the size of the public sector was not particularly large, and women there constituted a minority of its employees. More women benefited from jobs that were made available as a result of the country's shift to export-led growth strategies as a result of the leading role played by labour-intensive, export-oriented garment manufacturing. Technological change in agriculture and the spread of microfinance also generated informal employment opportunities. When these opportunities drew women into the public domain, women did experience some degree of transformation in their lives.

In all three countries, the state has been a major provider of the forms of employment most likely to empower women, although to a greater extent in Egypt than in Bangladesh or Ghana.

In all three countries, therefore, the state has been a major provider of the forms of employment most likely to empower women, although to a greater extent in Egypt than in Bangladesh or Ghana. It has also helped to redistribute the benefits of economic growth in other ways that have proved empowering for women, most prominently in the field of education. In Egypt, this was done by guaranteeing public-sector employment to those with secondary education regardless of gender. In Ghana and Bangladesh, this was done through concerted policy measures that in some cases were specifically directed to girls.

The findings in this report suggest that economic growth alone does not promote gender equality. Unless patterns of growth generate reasonable quality jobs for women, the extent to which greater gender equality is achieved will depend on the actions of the state and civil society. Greater gender equality does have the potential to contribute to inclusive growth when it is achieved in education, employment and other valued resources. In particular, women's access to valued resources can have positive distributional implications for growth. For example, women who have access to better quality employment, to higher levels of education, and in some contexts, to assets and independent associational life are more likely to decide how to spend their income and make decisions about their own health. In addition, they tend to gain respect within the community, participate in politics, express support for gender-egalitarian attitudes (including a more egalitarian distribution of unpaid workloads) and, in cultures characterized by a preference for sons, express less discriminatory attitudes towards daughters.

5. Policy implications

It is clear that the kind of formal employment that contributes most consistently to empowering women to exercise greater voice and agency within their households and communities has been on the decline in the shift to market-oriented strategies. Women were in the minority in formal public-sector employment, and have lost out disproportionately as these jobs were retrenched without making compensatory gains in formal private-sector employment. The high percentage of educated women among the economically inactive group in all three countries suggests that the dearth of jobs suited to their qualifications may be keeping many women out of the labour market. It is unlikely that in the near future the three countries will be able to provide sufficient formal employment opportunities to absorb all those, men as well as women, seeking such work. What may be a more realistic way forward is a two-pronged approach: (1) replicate some of the more desirable aspects of formal employment in the informal economy, and (2) extend the regulatory framework to bring increasing numbers of workers into the formal economy.

Current discussions about inclusive growth give employment generation a central place in the policy agenda and envisage a greater role for the state, not simply as a passive partner to the private sector, but proactively creating conditions that will allow countries to embark on more dynamic growth trajectories. The expansion of economic opportunities through greater attention to the employment potential of growth strategies would clearly create more hospitable macroeconomic conditions for achieving women's economic empowerment.

UN PHOTO/MARTINE PERRET



Dili, Timor-Leste woman collects fish at sunset.

Some of the sector-specific strategies discussed by inclusive growth economists would need to go a step further towards addressing locations and sectors in which women were at a particular disadvantage, or in which there was potential for generating female-intensive opportunities. In all cases, however, targeted interventions are needed to transform the gender-specific constraints that keep women out of the market or trapped in poorly paid activities. Three broad areas of intervention are highlighted. While they will need to be adapted to specific contexts, all three are likely to be relevant across a range of different contexts.

CREATE AN ENABLING REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Creating a more enabling regulatory environment will require action on a number of different fronts. One front is addressing discriminatory legislation, in particular legislation that requires women to seek permission from their husbands to open bank accounts or own businesses. Inheritance and property laws are another example of discriminatory legislation. Laws governing these issues, both customary and statutory laws, should be gradually aligned in order to ensure more egalitarian rights to property. A second front is apparently gender-neutral legislation that may have gender-biased impacts. For example, the complex bureaucratic procedures necessary to register enterprises not only discriminate against small enterprises they also discriminate against female entrepreneurs who are less likely than their male counterparts to have the knowledge, time and money to negotiate the barriers they represent. Similarly, the design of value-added taxes may unintentionally discriminate against goods and services provided by women. A third front is promoting legislation that seeks to level the economic playing field for women and men: state support for maternity leave and benefits to lessen the financial burden on private employers; legislation promoting equal pay for work of equal value; and progressive extension of basic labour standards throughout the economy.

A nurse listens to the heartbeat of a foetus at a local dispensary in western Kenya.



UNDP/ALLAN GICHIG

Social protection assists women and men to cope with, and recover from, the various kinds of risks and insecurities associated with globalization. In addition, social protection measures can be designed to address the risks and insecurities that are endemic to livelihoods in the informal economy where a disproportionate percentage of working women are concentrated.

SOCIAL PROTECTION IS INCREASINGLY RECOGNIZED AS A CENTRAL DIMENSION OF INCLUSIVE GROWTH

In an era characterized by growing global market competition, social protection is central to promoting inclusive growth. Social protection assists women and men to cope with, and recover from, the various kinds of risks and insecurities associated with globalization. In addition, social protection measures can be designed to address the risks and insecurities that are endemic to livelihoods in the informal economy where a disproportionate percentage of working women are concentrated. The gender-responsive design of such measures can go a long way towards addressing some of the gender-specific constraints that have been discussed in both this report and in the wider literature—particularly if the designs bear in mind women’s location at the crossroads of production and reproduction and paid and unpaid work. For example, public works programmes can generate jobs for both women and men, but their gender transformative potential could be enhanced if:

- Provision is made for childcare for women participating in these programmes;
- Minimum quotas are put in place to ensure women’s participation;
- Travel time to work is not long;
- Infrastructure projects are promoted that reduce women’s work burden (e.g. provide year round supply of potable water and woodlots close to homes);
- Social infrastructure, such as schools and clinics, is constructed; and
- Women’s access to markets and services is improved and the dissemination of ideas through improvements in roads and transport is promoted.

Similarly, the empowerment potential of cash transfers could be enhanced if they are untied from women’s reproductive responsibilities and combined with improved access to markets and the banking sector through, for example, smart cards, livelihoods training, information dissemination and business skills development to enhance their longer term employment prospects.

SUPPORT WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

This can give women a greater voice and influence in advancing their own needs, interests and priorities with powerful state and market actors whose actions may have created barriers to women's progress in the past, but who can be pressured from the bottom up to become agents for social transformation. Trade unions have historically played this role for workers, but with the growing informality of working relations other kinds of organizations more explicitly geared towards addressing women's gender-specific constraints have come to the forefront. While there was evidence of associational activity among the women in the Pathways surveys, there was very little evidence of independent associations and social movements that set out to actively represent women's strategic gender interests. Yet the organizational capacity of women, whether they are in wage- or self-employment, may be the missing ingredient that helps transform women's access to paid work into an economic pathway to collective empowerment and active citizenship.

INTRODUCTION



UN PHOTO/MARTINE PERRET

A woman sorts coffee beans in a Dili, Timor-Leste factory.

1. Rationale and objectives

The growing emphasis on **inclusive** growth as a key development goal signals the international development community's recognition that, on its own, the pace of growth is rarely sufficient to reduce poverty and promote human well-being—the **pattern** of growth also matters. While the literature includes various definitions of inclusive growth, these share a common concern with generating economic opportunities for all sections of the population, with a special emphasis on the poor, particularly women and young people, who have often been marginalized in previous growth strategies.¹ Central to many of these definitions is an emphasis on employment-centred or job-rich growth. In particular, it is assumed that since labour is the most abundant resource at the disposal of poor and marginalized groups, patterns of growth that allow them to participate in, and contribute to, economic growth processes are the most likely to ensure a broad-based distribution of the benefits of growth.

A second emerging theme in the policy literature is a concern for women's economic empowerment. Here again, while there are variations in the way that this concern has been articulated, there is a shared focus on promoting women's access to key economic assets and opportunities, with a particular focus on paid work.² This distinguishes paid work from unpaid productive work, which is included in the International Labour Organization's definition of economic activity, and unpaid reproductive work within the domestic domain, which is not.

The empowerment potential of paid work for women has, of course, been a matter of considerable debate within feminist literature. There is a long-standing body of work, influenced by both Marxist and liberal theory, that has emphasized the material dimensions of women's subordination and the extent to which women's economic dependence on a male breadwinner serves to curtail their capacity to exercise control over key aspects of their own lives. The apparent feminization of labour markets that has accompanied the opening up of economies to global competition, including in countries where women have traditionally been excluded from paid work, would appear to signal a positive trend in women's empowerment.

However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, not all forms of paid work are equally empowering. In addition to remuneration, what is also likely to matter is the social visibility of the work, the regularity and reliability of remuneration, the extent to which it is controlled by women and the conditions in which it is earned, including access to labour rights and social protection (Sen, 1990a; Whitehead, 1985; Agarwal, 1986; Kabeer, 2000; Pearson, 2004). Given that most women continue to be concentrated in poorly paid and informal forms of work with little or no social or legal protection, access to market opportunities may be exploitative rather than empowering. Their ability to take up more empowering forms of paid work is frequently curtailed by the fact that in most regions, women (and often girls) continue to bear primary responsibility for unpaid domestic work, whether or not they are economically active.

The apparent feminization of labour markets that has accompanied the opening up of economies to global competition, including in countries where women have traditionally been excluded from paid work, would appear to signal a positive trend in women's empowerment. However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, not all forms of paid work are equally empowering.

It is this continuing debate that led the authors of this report to select the theme of ‘Empowering Work’ as the focus of their research in Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh as part of a broader programme of work on Pathways of Women’s Empowerment.³ There were additional policy considerations for selecting this theme. An analytical review of the literature on the relationship between gender equality and growth studies carried out as part of the theme of ‘Empowering Work’ found fairly robust empirical support for the hypothesis that gender equality in education and employment contributed to economic growth (Kabeer and Natali, 2012). This effect appeared to operate both directly through its impacts on overall labour productivity in the economy as well as indirectly through its positive impacts on children’s health and well-being within the family and hence the labour productivity of subsequent generations of workers. Such findings suggest that improving women’s access to economic resources and opportunities can contribute to the inclusive character of growth, not only through the obvious route of extending the benefits of growth to women (who constitute half of the potential work force in any society), but also by improving the distributional dynamics of the growth process.

The evidence from the studies into the reverse relationship—the impact of economic growth on gender equality—was less consistent and indeed sometimes negative. Nevertheless, one striking finding that came out of this latter set of studies was that improvements in a range of different gender equality indicators were most likely to be reported in contexts in which economic growth was accompanied by rising levels of female education and employment. Despite the questions raised about the empowerment potential of paid work in the wider literature, this finding suggests that the enhancement of women’s agency associated with increasing levels of employment and education may be a pivotal factor in helping to translate changes in the broader structure of opportunities into positive changes in women’s rights and capabilities.

Such findings suggest that promoting women’s access to economic opportunities has an intrinsic rationale (transformative implications for various aspects of women’s lives) and an instrumental rationale (contribution to the pace and inclusiveness of growth). However, given the high levels of aggregation at which studies on the relationships between gender equality and economic growth are carried out—most rely on the use of cross-country regression analysis, with the attendant problems (Rodriguez and Rodrik, 2001)—they provide very little insight into the kinds of employment and levels of education that are most likely to be conducive to women’s empowerment in different contexts. Further, they cannot tell us what kinds of policy regimes and patterns of growth are most likely to generate these enabling opportunity structures for women.

This report draws on survey data collected as part of the ‘Empowering Work’ theme of the Pathways programme in order to address this knowledge gap. The Pathways surveys were not designed to explore linkages between women’s work and economic growth, but rather took women’s empowerment as a valued goal in its own right and set out to investigate the circumstances under which women’s access to paid work was likely to be empowering. This report takes the analysis a step further by bringing the survey data together within a comparative framework. This will allow us to carry out a more detailed, historically grounded and contextually located analysis into the extent to which the structure of economic opportunities generated by a country’s growth strategies translated into positive impacts on women’s lives in three different contexts: Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh.

UN PHOTO/KY CHUNG



A woman prepares snacks to be sold at the roadside in San Pedro, Côte d'Ivoire.

2. Setting the stage: conceptual issues and research questions

The agenda-setting paper for the ‘Empowering Work’ research theme spelled out some of the concepts, themes and research questions that informed the research strategy taken by the country teams (Kabeer, 2008a). Three key points from the paper will help to set the stage for the analysis in this report: the central place assigned to women’s capacity for choice and agency in our conceptualization of empowerment; the importance of contextual differences in the gendered structures of constraint in shaping the pathways of empowerment; and the fact that long-standing, deeply entrenched gendered patterns of kinship and family organization are not immutable

A young woman checks her name in the elections list at a voting station in Cairo, Egypt.



UN WOMEN/FATMA ELZAHRAA YASSIN

THE CENTRALITY OF WOMEN’S CAPACITY FOR CHOICE AND AGENCY TO THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

The conceptualization of empowerment that informs this (research) touches on many different aspects of change in women’s lives, each important in themselves, but also in their interrelationships with other aspects. It touches on women’s sense of self-worth and social identity; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status and identity; their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and to renegotiate their relationships with others who matter to them; and their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the societies in which they live in ways that contribute to a more just and democratic distribution of power and possibilities (Kabeer, 2008a, p. 27).

As the above quote from the agenda-setting paper suggests, women’s capacity for choice and agency was central to our conceptualization of empowerment. However, we recognized that this capacity was exercised within the limits imposed by the structural distribution of rules, norms, resources and responsibilities that served to locate different groups of women and men within broader social hierarchies of their societies. The conceptualization of women’s empowerment therefore encompassed both women’s capacity to exercise personal and interpersonal agency but also extended to their capacity to undertake collective action to challenge—and perhaps transform—the gendered ‘structures of constraint’ (Folbre, 1994a). Our focus on collective action reflects the point widely made in the feminist and social movement literature on social change: it is not the political protests of isolated individuals but the collective struggles of marginalized groups that have the potential to transform structures.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXTUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE GENDERED STRUCTURES OF CONSTRAINT IN SHAPING PATHWAYS OF EMPOWERMENT

We recognized the importance of taking account of contextual differences in the gendered structures of constraint in analysing the pathways of women’s empowerment. These differences, which reflect differences in the political, social and economic conditions that prevail across the world, give rise to a ‘geography of gender’ in the distribution of resources and opportunities in different contexts, including both availability and acceptability of different kinds of work for women

and men. The organization of kinship and family relations is a central aspect of the gendered structures of constraint in most societies, and the geography of gender is evident in some of the similarities and contrasts in the organization of these relations in the three country case studies. It would be useful to spell out some key aspects of these structures of constraint in the three countries in the study.

Egypt and Bangladesh share certain aspects of their kinship and gender relations. As Caldwell (1978) has pointed out, the description of the families of the Middle East as 'extended, patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal, endogamous and occasionally polygynous' can be applied, with some variation, across what Kandiyoti (1988) has termed a regional belt of 'classic patriarchy', which stretches from Northern Africa across the Middle East to the northern plains of South Asia, including Bangladesh.⁴ These are societies characterized by a highly corporate organization of family and kinship relations. Property and descent is traced through the patrilineage. Control over household labour and resources are vested in a senior patriarchal figure that is responsible for the welfare of family members, as well as its honour and status within the community (both of which are closely bound up with the virtue of women in the family). Women are generally secluded within the domestic domain and confined to reproductive tasks. These societies are consequently characterized by extremely low levels of labour-force participation by women—Boserup (1970) described them as 'male farming systems'—and women's dependence on male provision and protection for much of their lives. Such societies also tend to be characterized by strong cultures of son preference and excess levels of female mortality, contributing a disproportionate share of the world's 'missing women' (Sen, 1990b).

Although the belt of classic patriarchy cuts across cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries, religion, ethnicity and culture give rise to variations in the ideal-typical description outlined above. For example, marital endogamy in the form of cross-cousin marriage is far more prevalent in the Middle East than it is in Bangladesh and India where women generally marry outside their lineage. This means women are more likely to retain connections with their natal family after marriage in Egypt whereas in Bangladesh, marriage disrupts women's ties with their family of birth and the support it might provide to them. The practice of dowry, more closely associated with Hinduism in the South Asian context and previously unknown among Muslims, has emerged in Bangladesh in the past half century but is largely absent in Egypt. There are also variations within these countries by class, ethnicity and geographical location. For example, Upper Egypt is not only poorer than the rest of the country, but it is also considered far more socially conservative. In Bangladesh as well, religious conservatism appears to be far stronger in certain districts than others.

The West African region, where Ghana is located, exemplifies what Boserup described as 'female farming systems', a description that serves to stress women's significant contributions to agriculture in the region. Women in Ghana have a long history of independent farming. They also play a major role in agro-processing and trade, manage their own budgets and are considered to exercise considerable economic autonomy. Indeed, as Darkwah and Tsikata (2011) note, Ghanaian women featured in Boserup's writing as exemplars of female autonomy. At the same time, they point out that because the high rate of economic activity by women is taken for granted in much of the Ghanaian literature, its impact on their lives tends to be assumed rather than investigated.

Members of the Sourouyel Women's Group bring peanuts to the miller for grinding before making peanut paste to be sold in the women's Senegal village and local markets.



UN PHOTO/EVAN SCHNEIDER



A woman waters a field in Ghana.

Moreover, as with all ideal-typical descriptions, the reality is more varied and complex. There are a variety of agro-ecological conditions in Ghana, from arid savannah in the north to forest and coastal environments in the southern regions. It has over 60 different ethnic groups, although the Akan (44 per cent), Mole-Dagbani (16 per cent) Ewe (13 per cent) and Ga-Adangbe (8 per cent) make up the bulk of the population. Different groups are characterized by different kinship systems with different implications for access to resources and decision-making power by gender. The result is considerable diversity in household arrangements, with varying incidence of polygyny, non-coresident marriage, kin fostering and consensual unions.

The Akan, located mainly in the southern part of the country, are organized along matrilineal lines so that descent and property rights are traced through the mother's kinship group. Under this system, women's individual right to lineage land is not dependent on her marital status but can be exercised on non-marriage, during marriage and upon divorce and widowhood (Manuh, 1989). The matrilineage group, most often under the authority of the maternal uncle, retains considerable influence over a woman even after her marriage. While matrilineal systems may give women greater access to resources outside marriage, they are characterized by weaker nuclear structures and offer less economic security for women (Baden et al., 1994). Households tend to be characterized by non-pooling of resources: women and men manage separate income streams with convention dictating their separate responsibilities to the household.

Most ethnic groups in the north and east of the country are patrilineal so that descent as well as property rights are traced through the father's side of the family. Women's rights to claim land from their fathers is weaker than that of their brothers, and they cannot pass inherited land on to their children (Manuh, 1989). They also stand to lose their land and property on the death of their husbands. The influence of the natal family over women is far more limited after marriage among patrilineal groups.

LONG-STANDING, DEEPLY ENTRENCHED GENDERED PATTERNS OF KINSHIP AND FAMILY ORGANIZATION ARE NOT IMMUTABLE

The third key point made by the agenda-setting paper was that while it recognized that these gendered patterns of kinship and family organization have evolved over considerable periods of time and have become deeply entrenched in the wider structures of different societies, it also recognized that they were not immutable. They are constantly acted on by a variety of forces that served to reinforce, modify or transform them. Such forces may reflect purposive action on the part of different actors within the institutions of state, markets, civil society and households or the unintended consequences of such action, or they may reflect larger changes taking place at the local, national or global level. These forces do not necessarily eradicate the influence of the past on gender relations, but give them a 'path-dependence' so that apparently similar strategies for economic growth may be associated with very different pathways of change in the lives of women and men in different contexts.

The three country case studies provide a useful framework within which to compare the interaction between pre-existing structures of constraint in the different contexts and the broader forces of socioeconomic change. Each of these countries began its post-colonial history committed to a nation-building project based on

import-substituting industrialization combined with socialist policy discourse and efforts at redistributive welfare policies. Each abandoned these policies in favour of a broadly neo-liberal policy package along the familiar lines laid down by the World Bank/IMF, generally including some or all of the following elements: cutbacks in the public sector and privatization of state-owned enterprises, liberalization of trade and finance, exchange rate reform and deregulation of labour markets.

However, as Table A1 (see Annex 2) shows, the three countries started out from very different initial conditions and achieved varying degrees of transformation in their transition to market-oriented policies. For example, Egypt started out with higher per capita GDP in 1980 and continued to be considerably wealthier than the other two countries in 2010; both Bangladesh and Ghana reported a rise in their growth rates during this period while Egypt reported a decline. In fact, Egypt has reported a rise in the incidence of poverty in recent years while both Ghana and Bangladesh have been experiencing declines. Agriculture accounted for a much lower percentage of value-added to the GDP in Egypt in 1980, and there was little change in 2010. In both Ghana and Bangladesh, the contribution of agriculture to GDP declined considerably over this period, but while Bangladesh saw a rise in the share of manufacturing, in Ghana, growth in share of value added was concentrated in services.

The statistics in Table A1 suggest that similar-seeming policy packages started from very different initial conditions in the three countries and had very different impacts on their economic structures. In the next sections of the report, we will be exploring the implications of the pace and pattern of policy change in each country for the ground level reality of women's lives and livelihoods. We follow the same analytical structure for each of the country case studies. For each, we provide a brief account of the policy regimes of the three countries, how these mediated the adoption and implementation of the neo-liberal policy package and a description of the structure of opportunities that this generated for women and men. We will then draw on primary data collected for the Pathways 'Empowering Work' theme to examine the implications of these opportunities structures for different aspects of women's lives.

The three case-study countries began their post-colonial periods committed to a nation-building project based on import-substituting industrialization combined with socialist policy discourse and efforts at redistributive welfare policies. Each country abandoned these policies in favour of a broadly neo-liberal policy package along the familiar lines laid down by the World Bank/IMF. However, each country started out from very different initial conditions and achieved varying degrees of transformation in the transition to market-oriented policies.

3. Methodology

The primary data used in this report is drawn from purposively designed surveys carried out as part of the pathways research in the three countries. Details of the methodology used to gather the data are to be found in Annex 1. The surveys explored the empowerment potential of women's access to paid work and other economic resources, using the broad ranging definition of empowerment outlined earlier. This definition gave rise to clusters of indicators, measuring different dimensions of change: values, perceptions and attitudes, role in decision-making within the household, quality of relations within and beyond the family, participation in local and national-level politics and collective action to protest injustice or claim rights.

The valued resources in question can be taken to represent potential pathways of women's empowerment. The primary concern was with women's economic activity. In all three countries, we distinguished between formal employment, various forms of informal paid work, within and outside the home/farm and what the International Labour Organization calls 'contributing family labour', in other words, productive but unpaid work in family farms or enterprises. We were also interested in exploring the likely impact of three other categories of resources that feature prominently in the literature on women's empowerment. The first was education, which is seen in the literature not only to expand women's access to work opportunities but also to promote their cognitive capabilities and self-confidence (Jejeebhoy, 1995).⁵ The second was women's access to residential land and housing: this reflects a substantial body of literature arguing the transformative implications of women's access to property, primarily because it reduces women's dependency status (Agarwal, 1994; Deere and Leon, 2001). Finally, we were interested in women's access to associational resources beyond family and kin relations, as women's collective capabilities have been a distinct theme of recent feminist discourse (Kabeer, 1994; Batliwala, 1994; Rowland, 1998).

Government social worker visits women pottery makers in a small town of Ghana.



The Pathways surveys explored the empowerment potential of women's access to paid work and other economic resources, measuring different dimensions of change: values, perceptions and attitudes, role in decision-making within the household, quality of relations within and beyond the family, participation in local and national-level politics and collective action to protest injustice or claim rights.

Each country team designed its own survey, drawing on a common core of explanatory variables and indicators of empowerment, adding or dropping some according to perceived relevance to local context. Thus all three teams included empowerment indicators that sought to capture different aspects of women's economic agency and status within the family, their participation in community affairs and politics and their perceptions and attitudes in relation to various issues, which had a bearing on women's economic empowerment. In addition, given the strong culture of son preference and norms of female seclusion that had prevailed in Egypt and Bangladesh, the surveys in these countries included indicators to measure sex preference with regard to children and women's mobility in the public domain. And while all three teams included a question about the 'internal locus of control' from the World Values Survey, the Ghana team also included an explicit question about empowerment.⁶

As far as explanatory variables were concerned, along with the pathways variables, all three surveys included the following:

- A cluster of demographic variables (such as age and marital status) to control for the fact that in most cultures, women's status within the family and capacity for agency varies across the life course.
- Characteristics of the head of household to allow for the fact the dominant household members are likely to influence on women's attitudes and agency.
- Household wealth scores to capture possible variations in the impact of economic class. This was constructed by using factor analysis for a variety of assets owned or accessed by the household.
- A dummy for different locations to capture unobserved geographical variations in possible influences on women's empowerment.

In addition, Egypt and Bangladesh included routine television watching to capture exposure to new ideas, while both Ghana and Bangladesh factored in the influence of religion and religiosity on women's empowerment.

It was evident from preliminary data analysis that women in different work categories in each country varied considerably in terms of their individual attributes (e.g. age, marital status and education levels), household characteristics (e.g. household wealth, household head's occupation and education) and location. Some of these differences are likely to exercise a direct or indirect influence on the empowerment indicators. We therefore carried out the quantitative analysis in a number of stages.

The first stage examines the bivariate relationship between women's work status and our indicators of empowerment. This provides preliminary insights into the strength of the association between the two. The second stage of the analysis uses multivariate analysis to control for other possible influences on the indicators of empowerment. Because the empowerment indicators are expressed as dichotomous variables, logistic regression techniques are used. Here too the analysis proceeds by stages. The first step included only the four pathways variables along with age and marital status as control variables, given the importance of women's life course to their capacity for agency. The next stage adds the location variable, as this proved to be consistently significant in explaining variations in women's empowerment. We then added other variables associated with the respondent and her household—whether or not she was the household head, the number of children under five, household wealth, household size and whether or not she watched television regularly. Finally, we added the occupation and education of the household head.