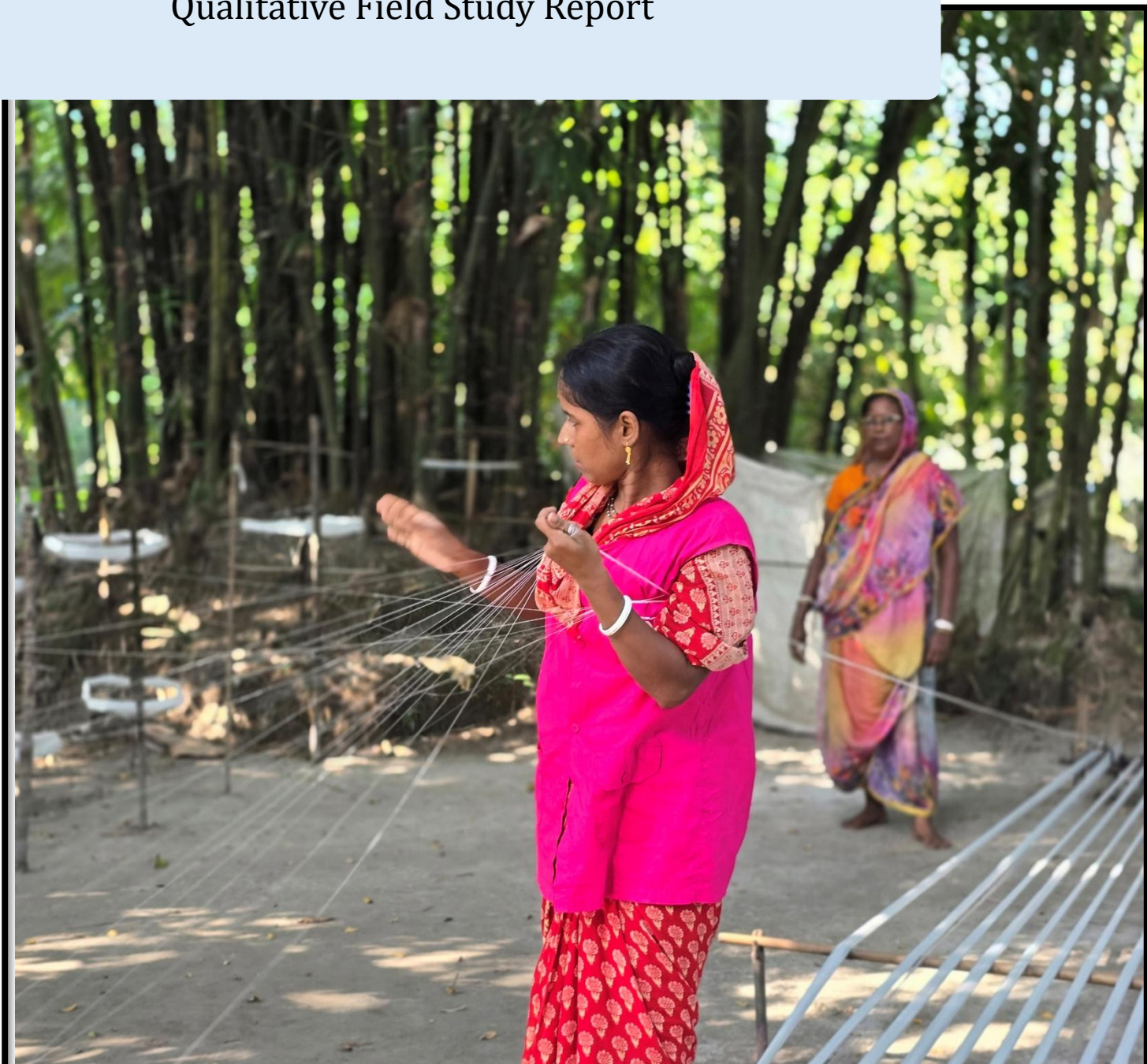




Negotiating Social Norms: Expanding Women's Capabilities and Economic Agency

Qualitative Field Study Report



Negotiating Social Norms: Expanding Women's Capabilities and Economic Agency

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Acknowledgement: The author, Arju Afrin Kathy, gratefully acknowledges Sadia Afrin Suvra and Shantanu Chanda as co-investigators and data collectors, whose contributions significantly enriched the quality and depth of this study.

Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme
Cabinet Division and General Economics Division (GED) of Bangladesh Planning Commission
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
www.socialprotection.gov.bd

Negotiating Social Norms: Expanding Women's Capabilities and Economic Agency

Abstract

This field-based qualitative study examines the gendered empowerment outcomes of the Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities (SWAPNO) project of UNDP Bangladesh, drawing on evidence from Chandpur and Cumilla districts. Grounded in Naila Kabeer's Agency Framework, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, and the Multidimensional Poverty perspective, the study investigates how gender-responsive social protection interventions interact with entrenched socio-cultural norms to reshape women's economic agency, capabilities, and social recognition.

Findings indicate that women's participation in public employment and income-generating activities has significantly enhanced their control over productive resources, strengthened decision-making within households, and increased social legitimacy in conservative community settings. The study highlights the negotiated nature of empowerment, whereby women navigate restrictive norms through culturally acceptable livelihood strategies, localized market engagement, and collective savings mechanisms such as ROSCAs.

SWAPNO's impact extends beyond income gains to capability expansion in areas including practical reasoning, health and nutrition decisions, financial planning, and adaptive entrepreneurship. Case studies show how women have converted modest resources into sustainable assets, revived traditional crafts, and, in some cases, assumed community leadership and employment generation roles. Empowerment emerges as relational and incremental, embedded in everyday practices that gradually redefine socially acceptable roles for women. Overall, the findings demonstrate that context-sensitive, gender-responsive social protection can effectively address multidimensional poverty by expanding women's real freedoms while maintaining cultural legitimacy. The study provides policy-relevant insights for designing inclusive social protection programmes that foster durable empowerment outcomes in socially conservative contexts.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; Gender-responsive social protection; Livelihood diversification; Agency; Capability expansion; Multidimensional poverty; Bangladesh.

Introduction

Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities (SWAPNO) is a gender-based social protection and poverty graduation initiative jointly implemented by the Local Government Division of the Government of Bangladesh and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Designed to uplift ultra-poor rural women out of persistent poverty, SWAPNO targets women who are widowed, divorced, abandoned, or left with a disabled spouse, groups that historically face significant socio-economic disadvantages and exclusion from formal labor markets. The programme aligns with Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) and adopts an integrated graduation model that combines public works employment, human capital development, financial inclusion, and livelihood promotion to ensure sustainable outcomes for participants.

At its core, SWAPNO addresses both immediate economic needs and longer-term capacity building. Women are engaged in climate-adaptive public asset maintenance and other forms of paid work, earning regular wages while simultaneously receiving life-skills training, including financial literacy, basic numeracy, and leadership development. This foundation enables beneficiaries to transition into diversified livelihood options, formal employment, or micro-enterprise development based on their interests and local market opportunities, often with

support to access savings and investment funds at the completion of their public works tenure.

In addition to employment and skills training, SWAPNO supports collective savings mechanisms such as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), which encourage financial discipline and help beneficiaries build capital for future ventures. The programme has also facilitated linkages with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and private sector partners to expand formal employment opportunities for women beyond the project period.

Since its inception, SWAPNO has expanded its geographical reach and scaled its impact, contributing to improved livelihoods, increased women's participation in economic activities, and enhanced socio-economic inclusion in targeted regions. As a pioneering example of gender-responsive social protection in Bangladesh, SWAPNO offers a model for integrating safety net support with market-oriented empowerment strategies.

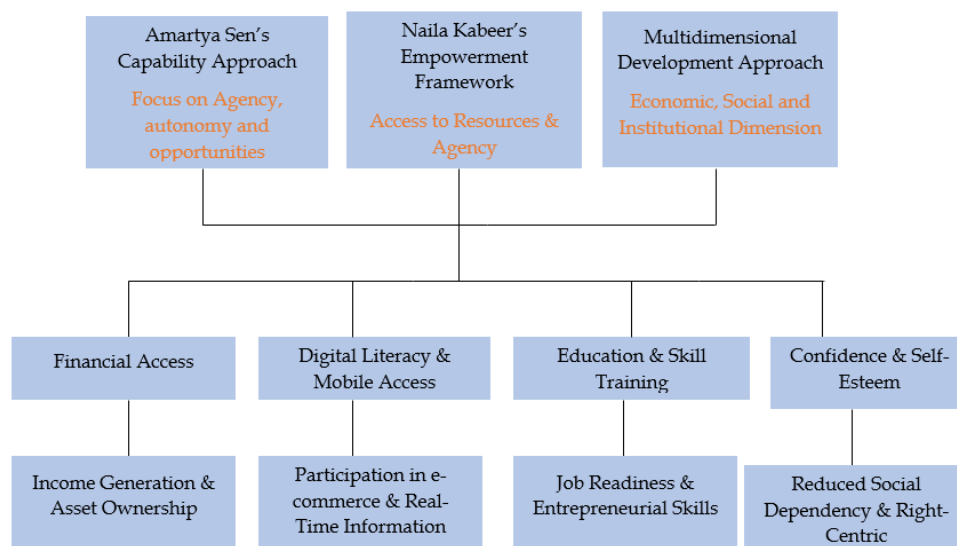
This report seeks to provide substantive evidence and insights to support the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme in the development of the Gender Good Practice Note, drawing on lessons learned and outcomes from ongoing interventions. It explores how SWAPNO's interventions interact with local socioeconomic norms, how women beneficiaries navigate opportunities for economic participation, and how these processes contribute to expanded capabilities, agency, and social recognition.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Naila Kabeer's (1999) Agency Framework, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1993), and the concept of Multidimensional Poverty. These frameworks collectively provide a robust lens to analyze women's empowerment as a multidimensional and contextually embedded process, linking individual agency, structural resources, and social outcomes.

Kabeer's Agency Framework conceptualizes empowerment as the interplay of three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources include material, human, and social assets that enable individuals to make choices; agency refers to the capacity to define goals and act upon them; and

achievements reflect the realization of desired outcomes. Within this framework, empowerment is not merely access to resources but the ability to convert them into meaningful social and economic outcomes. The framework is particularly useful for analyzing how SWAPNO interventions facilitate women's negotiation of household and community power structures.



Sen's Capability Approach complements this perspective by emphasizing the enhancement of individuals' real freedoms to achieve life outcomes they value. Capabilities are the substantive opportunities available to people, while functioning represents the actual achievements derived from these opportunities. Applying this approach, the study examines how SWAPNO activities such as skills training, income-generating initiatives, and collective savings expand women's capabilities beyond material gains, enabling informed choices in education, health, livelihood, and social participation.

The Multidimensional Poverty Framework situates empowerment within the broader context of deprivations across social, economic, and institutional domains. It highlights that poverty is not solely an income deficit but encompasses limitations in health, education, social inclusion, and political participation. By incorporating this framework, the study captures the ways in which SWAPNO addresses overlapping vulnerabilities, enabling women to overcome structural barriers that constrain agency and well-being.

Together, these theoretical lenses guide the analysis of empowerment outcomes by linking access to resources, enhancement of capabilities, and the reduction of multidimensional deprivation, demonstrating how context-sensitive social protection interventions can produce sustainable, gender-responsive impacts.

| Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to examine the gender dimensions and empowerment outcomes of the Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities (SWAPNO) project (will be used as SWAPNO throughout the report), implemented under the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme. The qualitative approach was purposefully selected for its capacity to capture the complex, context-specific, and deeply embedded social realities that quantitative methods often fail to reveal. By privileging participants' own narratives, this approach enabled a rich exploration of lived experiences, subjective meanings, and the transformative processes of empowerment within local socio-cultural contexts.

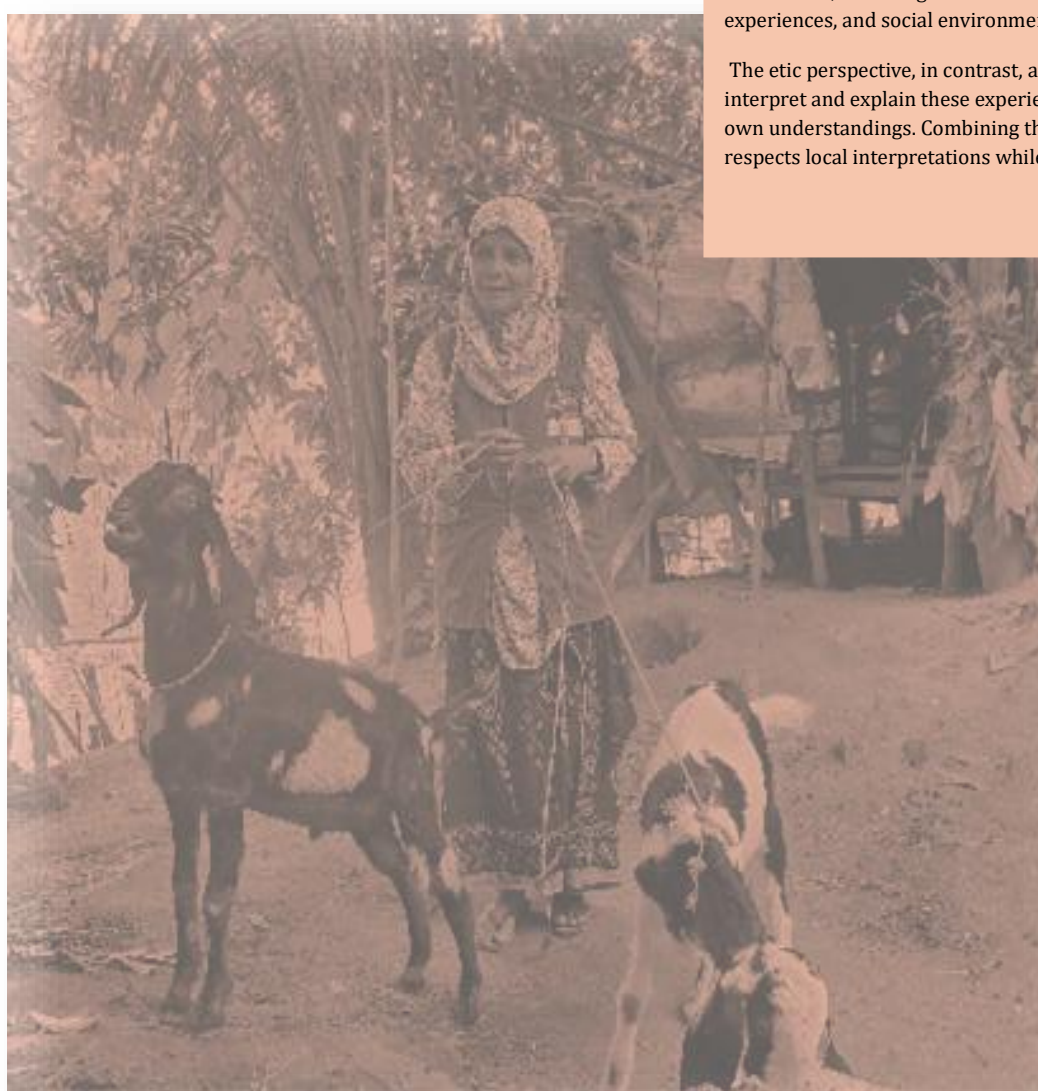
Data collection primarily relied on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD), which provided complementary insights into both individual and collective experiences of women beneficiaries. The methodological design integrated ethnographic principles of field inquiry, employing both emic and etic perspectives to ensure analytical depth and cultural sensitivity. This dual lens allowed the research team to interpret gender and empowerment not as abstract constructs, but as socially situated practices that are negotiated within specific community norms, power relations, and institutional settings.

| Research Approach

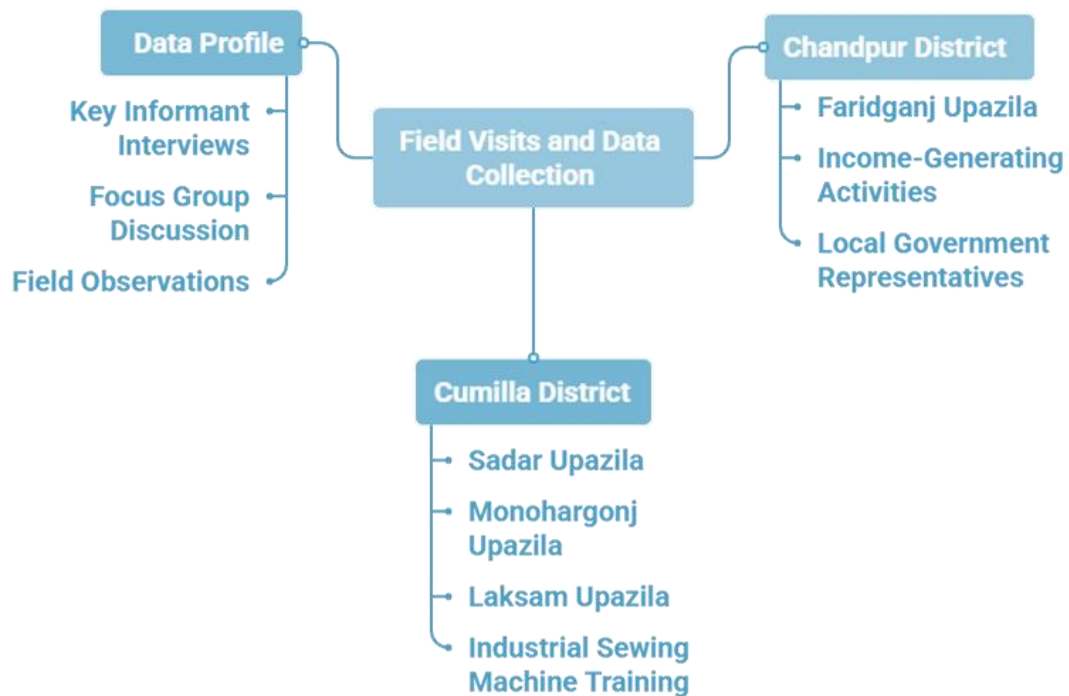
Note on Perspectives

This study employs both emic and etic perspectives to analyze women's empowerment within the SWAPNO programme. Drawing on Marvin Harris's (1976) framework of cultural materialism, the emic perspective captures the meanings, distinctions, and categories that women themselves use to interpret their actions, experiences, and social environment.

The etic perspective, in contrast, applies analytical concepts from social science to interpret and explain these experiences in a way that is independent of participants' own understandings. Combining these lenses allows for a nuanced analysis that respects local interpretations while providing broader explanatory insights.



| Qualitative Fieldwork: Sites, Tools, and Participants



Empirical Setting and Data Collection

This study draws on qualitative data generated through field visits in the Chandpur and Cumilla districts of Bangladesh. The fieldwork was designed to examine the gendered empowerment outcomes of the SWAPNO by documenting women lived experiences, institutional interactions, and livelihood trajectories. The mission also aimed to identify transferable good practices relevant to gender-responsive social protection programming under the SSPS Programme.

Fieldwork in **Chandpur District** was undertaken in Faridganj Upazila, covering South Paikpara, Karaitoli, and Parchim Balithuba Modhangan villages, where SWAPNO interventions are actively implemented. Data collection focused on women beneficiaries engaged in diverse income-generating activities (IGAs), including *Nakshi Khata* embroidery, *Shital Pati* weaving, bamboo and cane crafts, poultry farming, and livestock rearing. To contextualize women's economic participation within local governance structures, interviews were also conducted with key local government actors, including the Union Parishad Chairman,

Union Administrative Officer, and Union Parishad members.

In **Cumilla District**, fieldwork covered Cumilla Sadar, Monohargonj, and Laksam Upazilas. The research team observed industrial sewing machine training sessions at AID Cumilla and conducted interviews with women engaged in tailoring, weaving, and small-scale retail enterprises. This phase of data collection emphasized Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to capture individual empowerment pathways, livelihood diversification strategies, and subjective assessments of economic and social change.

Overall, the study is based on 27 Key Informant Interviews, including 25 beneficiaries, one Upazila Chairman, and one Union Parishad Member, alongside one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with women beneficiaries. Data was further supplemented by systematic field observations. The use of multiple qualitative methods enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening the validity and depth of the findings.

| Key Findings

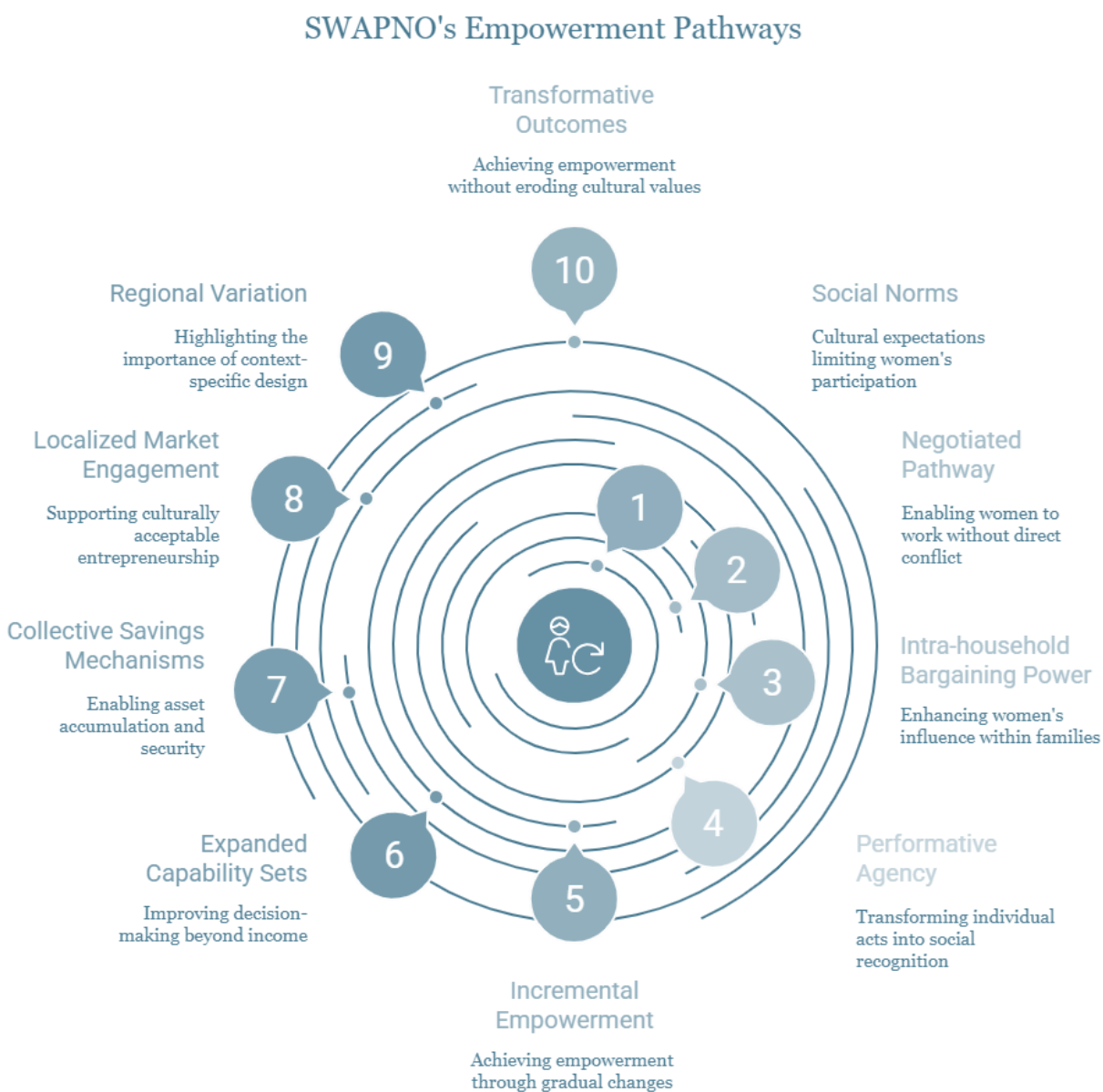


Figure: Author's Prepared Based on Empirical Data

1| Constrained Capabilities under Normative Regulation

Social Dictates and the Denial of Women's Capabilities

Field evidence from Chandpur reveals a socio-cultural context in which women's economic participation is tightly regulated by religious conservatism and entrenched patriarchal norms. As articulated by a local government representative:

“Chandpur is religiously conservative; people would have preferred starving than letting their women work outside along with men. From that state convincing women and sensitizing households to come out and work as public sector workers was a difficult job for us... But SWAPNO women have now become exemplary for other women that there is no harm working for bread and butter”

(Union Parishad Chairman, Faridganj, Chandpur)

This statement reflects not merely an attitudinal preference but a systemic constraint on women's agencies, operating through socially sanctioned norms that equate women's public presence with moral transgression. From the perspective of Sen's Capability Approach, such norms severely restrict women's capability to set their substantive freedoms to pursue lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999).

Although women possessed the basic means to participate in economic activities; time, physical ability, and proximity to public works their conversion of resources into valued functioning's was blocked by social dictates. As a result, women were compelled to choose socially acceptable deprivation over socially unacceptable autonomy. This dynamic exemplifies multidimensional poverty, wherein deprivation extends beyond income deficits to encompass restricted freedoms, social recognition, and dignity.

2 | Negotiating Agency through Programmatic Intervention

The project's gender-responsive public employment interventions created a negotiated pathway through which women gradually entered the public sphere without directly confronting prevailing social norms. Interpreted through Naila Kabeer's (1999) Agency Framework, this transformation unfolds across three interrelated dimensions.

Access to Public Resources and Economic Legitimacy

By engaging in public employment and receiving regular wages, women accessed a form of public and legitimate economic resource. These earnings earned through visible, state-supported mechanisms reconfigured intra-household power relations by legitimizing women's economic contributions. Within Kabeer's framework, such access constitutes the resource dimension of empowerment, enabling the exercise of agency and the pursuit of valued outcomes.

Public Visibility as a Performance of Agency

Women's participation in public work functioned not only as an economic activity but also as a performative act of negotiated resistance. Their visible presence in collective workspaces gradually shifted community perceptions, transforming women from invisible domestic laborers into socially recognized economic actors. The characterization of these women as "exemplary" signals a critical transition from isolated acts of agency to collective social validation marking the consolidation of agency as achievement.

Capability Expansion and the Reframing of Dignity

The most consequential shift lies in the expansion of women's capabilities. Beneficiaries reported increased confidence in decision-making related to children's education, healthcare, savings, and household investments. These gains underscore that empowerment is not reducible to income enhancement alone but involves the renegotiation of social boundaries that define what women are permitted to do and be. Through everyday practices, beneficiaries expanded the range of socially acceptable female roles, thereby reshaping normative expectations for future generations.

3 | Regional Variation and Contextual Negotiations of Empowerment

Comparative field evidence from Chandpur and Cumilla highlights how empowerment trajectories are shaped by local socio-cultural configurations. Unlike earlier findings from Rangpur, where women's mobility faced relatively fewer restrictions, both districts exhibit strong norms of male guardianship exercised by husbands and fathers. Within this context, women's participation in public works such as community maintenance and road construction represents a significant normative shift.

The project's approach demonstrates that empowerment needs not emerge through direct confrontation with cultural values. Instead, by embedding women's participation within socially legitimate frameworks, the programme facilitated incremental norm change. These findings underscore the importance of context-sensitive social protection, where empowerment is pursued through culturally negotiated pathways rather than externally imposed models.

Economic Advancement and Strategic Asset Formation

Across both districts, women reported notable improvements in economic security and asset accumulation. Participation in Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) enabled beneficiaries to transform modest wages into savings and productive investments. Several women reported asset growth reaching up to five times their initial contribution of BDT 3,600, facilitated through lottery-based lump-sum disbursements.

These collective financial mechanisms functioned as micro-platforms for empowerment, allowing women to invest in home-based enterprises such as tailoring, weaving, and livestock rearing. Within Kabeer's framework, this transition reflects a movement from mere access to resources toward strategic control and utilization, signaling deeper economic agency.

Adaptive Livelihoods and Localized Market Engagement

Women in Chandpur and Cumilla adopted livelihood strategies that carefully balanced economic participation with cultural legitimacy. Engagements in *Nakshi Khata* embroidery, *Shital Pati* weaving, bamboo and cane crafts, and livestock rearing were typically mediated through local buyers, intermediaries, or neighborhood networks rather than distant markets.

This localized market engagement illustrates how empowerment can be adaptive and relational. By situating economic activities within acceptable spatial and social boundaries, women expanded their autonomy while maintaining social acceptance. The findings reinforce that empowerment in conservative settings often unfolds incrementally, through negotiated participation rather than abrupt disruption of norms.

Household Agency, Civic Awareness, and Relational Power

Consistent with prior findings from Rangpur, women in Chandpur and Cumilla expressed limited interest in formal political leadership. However, this should not be interpreted as political apathy. Rather, women articulated a contextually grounded understanding of empowerment, prioritizing influence within households and immediate communities.

Beneficiaries reported increased control over income, greater involvement in decisions regarding children's education and healthcare, and enhanced bargaining power within families. Such forms of empowerment are relational and incremental, embedded in everyday practices of negotiation. These shifts suggest that women's voices are gaining legitimacy within socially sanctioned spaces, laying the groundwork for longer-term structural transformation.

Transformative Outcomes and Cultural Revitalization

Beyond economic gains, the project's interventions generated multidimensional transformations across beneficiaries' lives. Women demonstrated improved technical skills, entrepreneurial capacity, and life competencies, contributing to better household nutrition, education outcomes, and health awareness.

Importantly, empowerment was achieved without undermining cultural or religious values. In several cases, women emerged as custodians and innovators of traditional crafts, revitalizing practices such as *Nakshi Katha* and *Shital Pati* weaving while adapting designs for contemporary markets. This synthesis of economic empowerment and

cultural preservation illustrates how gender-responsive social protection can catalyze holistic transformation embedding agency within both economic and cultural systems.

4 | Differentiated Patterns of Civic and Political Agency across Regions

Comparative field evidence indicates notable regional differences in women's civic and political agency among the beneficiaries. During an earlier study visit in Rangpur, women demonstrated higher levels of political voice, pragmatic engagement with local governance, and, in some cases, willingness to contest local-level elections. In contrast, such expressions of formal political participation were largely absent in Chandpur.

This divergence appears to be shaped by socio-cultural context. Field observations suggest that Chandpur's more socially and religiously conservative environment imposes stronger normative constraints on women's political visibility. Consequently, empowerment in Chandpur is expressed primarily through negotiated economic participation and relational agency rather than overt political mobilization, underscoring the context-dependent nature of empowerment trajectories.

Ratna Rani

Reviving Heritage Through Economic Agency

Ratna Rani, a 42-year-old resident of Monoharganj, had long lived at the intersection of economic precarity and social marginalization. As the primary earner in a household where her husband lives with a physical disability, she faced persistent financial insecurity and limited avenues for dignified work. Her engagement with the programme marked a turning point in this trajectory.

Through her participation in a Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA), Ratna accessed a modest sum of BDT 3,600. Rather than allocating the funds toward short-term consumption, she made a deliberate and strategic choice to invest in a traditional weaving frame to revive *Jaal Bunon* (net weaving); a craft once practiced by her late father-in-law but nearly extinct in the locality. Drawing on inherited family knowledge and informal training, Ratna transformed this dormant skill into a viable household enterprise.

Over time, her initiative evolved into a unique livelihood in the area. At present, Ratna's household remains the sole producer of handmade nets in Monoharganj, supplying local wholesalers and gradually expanding production capacity. She has articulated plans to formalize the enterprise through the establishment of a small-scale production unit, signaling a transition from subsistence-based activity to sustained economic engagement.

Ratna's experience depicts how gender-responsive social protection can generate outcomes that extend well beyond income enhancement. By enabling the productive use of small financial resources, the project facilitated not only economic agencies but also the revival of a fading cultural practice, restoring a sense of dignity, purpose, and social recognition. Her journey underscores the potential of culturally rooted empowerment pathways to reshape household resilience and redefine women's leadership within their communities, with implications that resonate across generations.



Marjan Begum

Capability Expansion through Financial Autonomy

The case of Marjan Begum (Age 40, with three daughters) demonstrates a critical transition from relying solely on informal financial mechanisms to achieving greater livelihood security and improved nutritional functioning. Her trajectory provides valuable evidence for how targeted training can modify household conversion factors and influence resource utilization.

Resources, Agency, and Financial Mobilization

Marjan Begum initiated her economic activity, known as *Beter Kaj* (bamboo handicrafts), using an initial resource of 3,600 BDT sourced from a Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA). This act of securing and mobilizing capital represents an independent exercise of Agency (Kabeer, 1999) toward livelihood generation.

Her subsequent diversification includes the ownership of five ducks and seven chickens. While the initial capital source was market-oriented, the resultant assets have been strategically deployed for internal household security, demonstrating a mixed strategy for

reducing vulnerability to Multidimensional Poverty.

Shifting Functioning's: Nutritional Capabilities and Training

A significant finding relates to the utilization of the poultry assets. When questioned about selling the eggs, Marjan Begum articulated a conscious, informed choice to consume them for household nutrition, directly referencing the knowledge gained from her participation in the livelihood trainings.

This decision is a powerful example of Capability Expansion. The training acted as an informational conversion factor, enabling her to recognize and value the nutritional benefit of the eggs (a resource) and convert them into the enhanced functioning of Bodily Health (Nussbaum, 2011) for her family, rather than converting them into immediate cash income. This prioritizes long-term human capital development (nutritional security) over short-term financial gain, a strategic resource allocation often associated with empowered decision-making.



Economic Linkages and Financial Autonomy

Regarding the market chain, her products are collected by buyers directly from the household. This arrangement suggests an established, low-mobility trade system that minimizes logistical costs and potential exposure risks, which is advantageous for women balancing domestic responsibilities and economic activity in restrictive settings.

Furthermore, Marjan Begum demonstrates enhanced financial agency through her savings practice. The establishment of a savings account at Bank Asia and her reported discipline of saving "on an ad-hoc basis" (e.g., 50/100 BDT daily) reveals a clear understanding of financial planning and the importance of creating a resilience fund against economic shocks. This consistent effort, regardless of the amount, solidifies her achievements in financial autonomy and contributes directly to reducing her household's vulnerability to future Multidimensional Poverty.

Tania Akter

Entrepreneurial Agency and Pathways out of Multidimensional Poverty

The case study provides a compelling example of successful economic Agency and the expansion of Capabilities achieved through strategic resource mobilization. Tania Akter initiated her door-to-door clothing and jewelry business with an initial capital investment (I_0) of 3,600 BDT, secured through a Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA). The subsequent growth of her business investment to 45,000 BDT (I_t) demonstrates a remarkable achievement in asset accumulation and economic empowerment.

Asset Growth and Financial Resource Conversion

To quantify this mobility, the Asset Growth Multiplier (μ) is calculated:

$$\mu = \frac{\text{Subsequent growth of her business investment}}{\text{initial capital investment}}$$

Her investment has increased by a factor of 12.5 times.

This rapid, self-financed growth demonstrates the successful conversion of initial resource access (the ROSCA capital) into expanded assets and sustained economic functioning.

Agency and Strategic Decision-Making

This financial success is underpinned by enhanced Agency, as defined by Naila Kabeer. The beneficiary's actions reveal two critical components of economic agency:

Her decision to invest the ROSCA funds and subsequently increase her capital is an independent exercise of economic choice.

She now undertakes frequent travel from Chandpur to Dhaka New Market (approximately 113 KM) for first-hand material procurement. It demonstrates autonomy, requiring logistical negotiation, time allocation, and direct engagement with external markets, thereby challenging local dependencies and traditional restrictions on women's mobility, which has re-negotiated the Social Norms traditionally been prevailing in Chandpur.

Her stated rationale for this rigorous procurement strategy that selling "*good product increases loyal customers allowing a good margin*" indicates sophisticated practical reason (a core of Nussbaum's Capability).

She prioritizes quality and customer loyalty over short-term bargaining efforts, strategically utilizing her reputation as a reliable and popular local vendor to maintain a better profit margin.

Capability Expansion and Multidimensional Poverty Reduction

The beneficiary has enhanced visibility (quite a well-known and popular face) signifies the accumulation of social capital, which acts as a crucial social conversion factor. This reputation facilitates better market access and reduces transactional risks, further solidifying her economic gains.

This case study demonstrates the movement away from Multidimensional Poverty through: (a) achieving financial security (material well-being), and (b) expanding capabilities by exercising control over her life and environment (strategic mobility and business decision-making). Her demonstrated ability to build and sustain a successful enterprise serves as a concrete achievement that validates women's economic participation and sets a precedent for others in the locality.



Kohinoor Bagum

Agency as Resilience and Structural Transformation

The case of Kohinoor Begum (38 years) provides a powerful example of how targeted interventions can facilitate empowerment for women facing the most acute forms of Multidimensional Poverty, characterized not only by economic deprivation but also by severe social marginalization and abandonment.

Resources, Vulnerability, and Agency Initiation

Ms. Begum's initial status was defined by profound vulnerability: she was a woman without spousal support, explicitly categorized by the community through her husband's social designation as a '*Badaimma*' (an employable but idle, often alcoholic male). Her engagement as a beneficiary provided the initial resource with a stable public-sector income and critically, access to the informational resource of formal sector training in sewing skills.

This decision to enroll and utilize the training represents a definitive Act of Agency (Kabeer, 1999) to actively exist a state of structured dependency and social stigma.

Strategic Resource Conversion and Market Progression

Ms. Begum's subsequent career progression demonstrates strategic competence in converting acquired skills (a capability) into sustainable economic functionings:

Initial Adaptation: She began her business as a mobile, on-foot street vendor (a '*Feri Wala*'), a low-overhead, high-mobility strategy. This required entrepreneurial risk and an ability to navigate the public market space, challenging the normative constraints typically placed on women's mobility.

Asset Consolidation: Through diligent savings from her sales, Ms. Begum demonstrated effective financial management, allowing her to transition from a mobile vendor to operating a stationary shop (mostly clothing) in the local bazar. This transition signifies asset consolidation and the achievement of higher economic stability and visibility within the commercial environment.

Achievement and Structural Impact

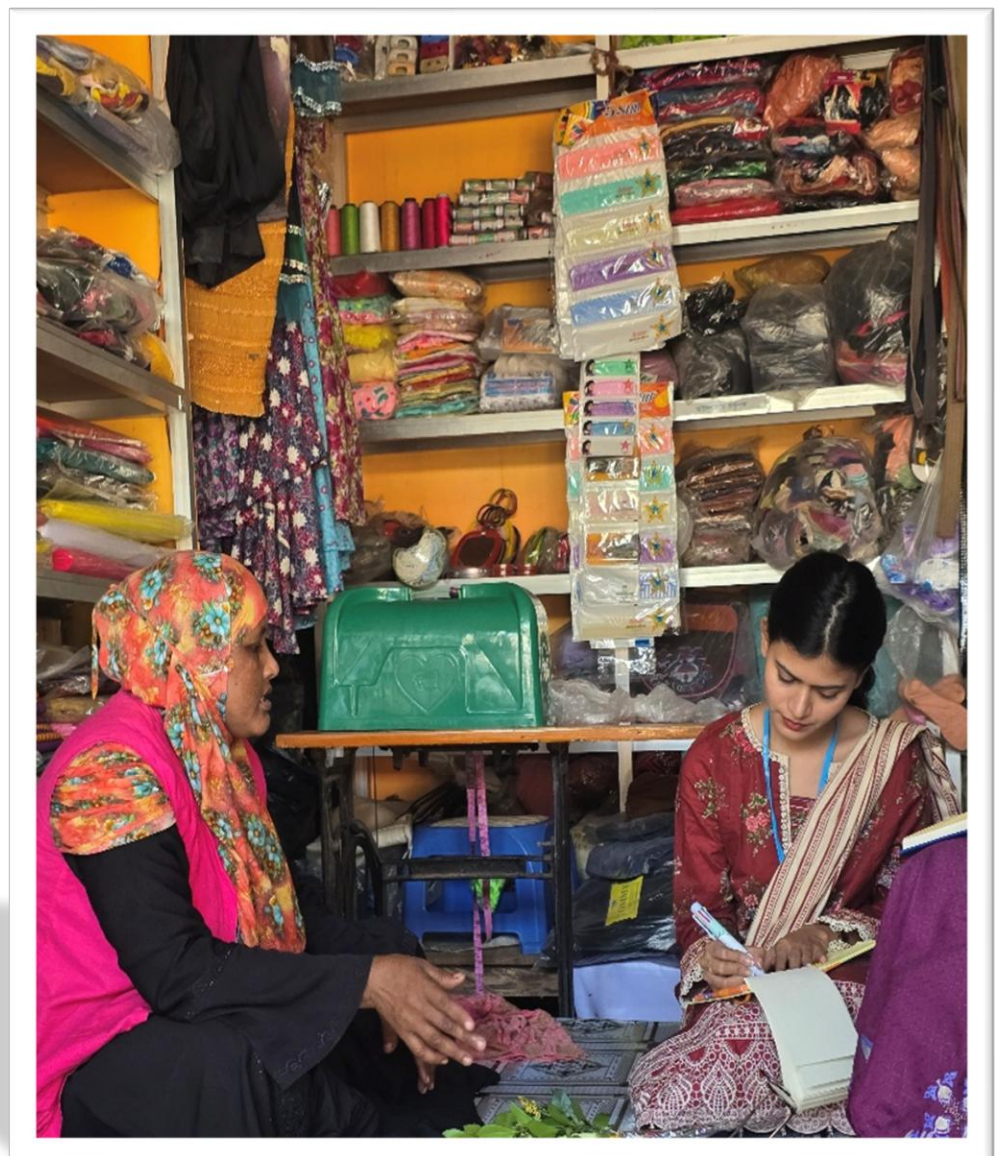
The status of Ms. Begum's enterprise, shop housing a sewing machine, is a tangible Achievement (Kabeer, 1999) of her personal agency. Furthermore, her expressed aspiration to hire other women with sewing skills signals a desired shift from personal economic survival to structural empowerment.

It positions Ms. Begum as a provider of opportunities, actively creating new economic capabilities for other vulnerable women. She is decided to recruit any other women who has sewing skills in her shop.

Challenges Social Stigma

It transforms her social identity from that of a dependent, abandoned woman to that of an employer and community anchor; effectively counteracting the social deprivation associated with her past and validating women's entrepreneurial leadership within the community.

Ms. Begum's journey shows how an intervention can unlock a marginalized woman's Capability for Practical Reason (Nussbaum, 2011), enabling her to make strategic choices that not only secure her livelihood but actively contribute to the economic well-being and dignity of her peers.



Sumi Akter

Skill-Based Empowerment and Dignified Livelihoods

A beneficiary Sumi Akter (23), a young mother of a three-year-old child who had previously experienced domestic violence, accessed livestock training through the project as part of its skills-based livelihood support. This intervention marked a critical turning point in her life, enabling a transition from vulnerability and economic dependence toward a more secure livelihood and enhanced social recognition.

Importantly, it also opened a socially negotiated pathway for her participation in paid work within a context where women's economic roles are often tightly circumscribed.

Prior to the training, Sumi had limited opportunities for income generation beyond the domestic sphere. Today, she is known

across her village and in two to three surrounding villages as a dependable livestock vaccinator. By providing vaccination services to households with cattle and other domestic animals, she occupies a role that is both economically productive and socially acceptable, allowing her to engage in public work without directly challenging prevailing gender norms.

Villagers regularly seek her services for injections and basic animal health support, reflecting a growing trust in her technical competence and professional reliability. Her work represents a shift from socially invisible labour to a recognized service function embedded within community needs.

The significance of Sumi's experience lies in the dignity attached to her work. In a setting where women's mobility and public engagement are often restricted, she moves confidently from home to home as a skilled service provider. This redefinition of her social position illustrates how empowerment can occur through the gradual renegotiation, rather than confrontation, of gender norms.

Beyond individual transformation, Sumi's trajectory highlights the longer-term community-level impact of SWAPNO's approach. By investing in practical skills that respond to locally recognized needs, the project has facilitated forms of empowerment that are sustainable and socially legitimate. Sumi's work is likely to continue benefiting households, livestock owners, and future generations, demonstrating how gender-responsive social protection can embed lasting change within everyday social relations.

| Conclusion

This paper examined the gendered empowerment outcomes of the project in Chandpur and Cumilla, analysing women's experiences through the lenses of capability expansion, agency, and multidimensional poverty. The findings indicate that the project's gender-responsive social protection interventions have contributed to substantive, though contextual contingent, improvements in women's economic participation, social recognition, and decision-making autonomy. Empowerment outcomes under the project do not follow a linear progression; rather, they emerge through gradual and negotiated processes shaped by prevailing socio-cultural norms and institutional environments.

Evidence suggests that empowerment gains are most sustainable when livelihood interventions are embedded within socially legitimate forms of work. Women's engagement in income-generating activities, skills-based services, and locally demanded enterprises enabled them to strengthen control over productive resources while maintaining community acceptance. These pathways facilitated improvements in household bargaining power, income stability, and asset accumulation, reflecting meaningful expansions in women's capabilities, particularly in relation to economic agency, practical decision-making, and adaptive livelihood strategies.

However, the study also identifies persistent structural and behavioral constraints that moderate the depth of empowerment. Regional variation in civic engagement reveals that economic and social gains do not automatically translate into political participation, particularly in more conservative social contexts. In addition, widespread credit aversion, incomplete participation in formal sector training, and a growing mismatch between educational aspirations and labour market demands limit the extent to which livelihood gains can be consolidated and scaled. These findings highlight the importance of complementary institutional support and context-sensitive capacity-building beyond initial programme interventions.

Overall, the SWAPNO project demonstrates that gender-responsive social protection can contribute to multidimensional poverty reduction by enabling women to renegotiate social roles and expand their freedoms within existing normative frameworks. The programme's impact extends beyond income generation, illustrating how skills development, livelihood security, and social legitimacy interact to produce durable empowerment outcomes. Sustaining and deepening these effects will depend on continued post-training support, strengthened institutional linkages, and culturally attuned financial literacy and inclusion strategies. The SWAPNO experience thus offers important insights into how social protection programmes can facilitate incremental yet transformative change in women's lives within constrained socio-political settings.

| Glossary of Key Terms and Acronyms

A. Theoretical and Analytical Concepts

Agency; The ability of individuals to define goals and act upon them, including making strategic life choices within given social, economic, and institutional constraints.

Agency Framework (Kabeer, 1999); A conceptual model that defines empowerment through the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements.

Empowerment; A process through which individuals expand their ability to make strategic life choices and translate them into meaningful outcomes.

Capabilities; The substantive freedoms individuals have to achieve ways of being and doing that they have reason to value.

Capability Set; The range of functionings that an individual can realistically choose from within existing constraints.

Capability Approach (Sen, 1993; 1999); An evaluative framework that assesses well-being in terms of people's real freedoms rather than income or resource ownership alone.

Functionings; The realized states and activities that individuals achieve, such as earning income, being educated, or participating in social life.

Practical Reason; The capability to reflect, plan, and make informed decisions about one's life and livelihood.

Relational Agency; Agency exercised through social relationships and negotiated within family and community structures.

Economic Agency; The capacity to participate in, control, and benefit from economic activities and resource allocation.

B. Poverty, Resources, and Structural Constraints

Multidimensional Poverty; A form of deprivation that extends beyond income poverty to include deficits in health, education, social inclusion, and political participation.

Resources (Material, Human, Social); Assets that enable choice, including financial means, skills and education, and social networks.

Social Conversion Factors; Social norms, institutions, and power relations that shape how individuals convert resources into capabilities and achievements.

Achievements; The realized outcomes that result from the effective exercise of agency and use of resources.

Social Legitimacy; Collective acceptance of individuals' roles and activities as socially appropriate and valued.

C. Social Protection and Programmatic Concepts

Gender-Responsive Social Protection; Social protection interventions designed to address gender-specific vulnerabilities while promoting women's agency and participation.

SWAPNO Project; A gender-responsive social protection initiative in Bangladesh combining public employment, skills training, and livelihood support to enhance women's empowerment.

Gender Good Practice Note; A policy-oriented document synthesizing evidence and lessons learned to inform gender-responsive programming.

Public Employment Programme; A government-supported initiative providing temporary wage employment while contributing to community development.

Income-Generating Activities (IGAs); Economic activities supported by development programmes to enable income earning and livelihood sustainability.

D. Socio-Cultural Context

Socio-Cultural Norms; Shared beliefs and practices that shape acceptable roles, behaviors, and expectations within a community.

Cultural Legitimacy; Acceptance of economic and social activities as consistent with prevailing cultural and religious values.

E. Financial and Livelihood Mechanisms

Rotating Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA); An informal financial mechanism in which members contribute regular savings and receive lump-sum payouts on a rotating basis.

Asset Formation; The process of accumulating productive or financial assets that enhance long-term economic security.

Asset Growth Multiplier; A ratio measuring the expansion of assets over time relative to initial capital investment.

Financial Literacy; The knowledge and skills required to manage savings, credit, and investments effectively.

Adaptive Entrepreneurship; Livelihood strategies that adjust to social, cultural, and market constraints while sustaining economic activity.

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