Empowerment of women in Monsurabad Island: limitations of development in rural Bangladesh

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<td>モンスワバルデド島における女性の権力化: 発展の制限に関する探査</td>
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<tr>
<td>発行年</td>
<td>2010年</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2241/113148">http://hdl.handle.net/2241/113148</a></td>
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The author investigates the interconnectedness between the empowerment of women and development on the basis of a certain type of project targeted at women in rural areas of Bangladesh. The author defines development in rural areas in terms of social change ascertainable in local communities and argues that women have a significant potential to contribute to social change if they are and remain empowered to do so. Hence, the study examines the positive and negative impacts of development programs seeking to promote social change in rural communities through the empowerment of women. She focuses on the specific projects that have been implemented in rural Bangladesh through the application of the Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) approach. This approach has been applied by the British government-sponsored NGO ActionAid, which has promoted women's empowerment projects in more than 35 states in Africa, Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean. In Bangladesh, the approach has been used through local NGOs since 1993.

For the REFLECT approach, ActionAid draws on the pedagogy that has been advocated by Paolo Freire, who connected education with the goal of liberation and positioned learners as autonomous participants in the liberation process rather than as ignorant recipients of knowledge transfers. Freire based his pedagogy of liberation on the postulate that literacy skills are required for the enhancement of conscientisation which, in turn, enhances liberation. ActionAid combines Freires pedagogy with the like-minded Participatory Rural Approach (PRA), that seeks to utilize local knowledge available in rural communities, and with gender theory which insists that the empowerment of women is the prime condition for the accomplishment of gender equality. In the programmatic of ActionAid, the combination of Freire's pedagogy with PRA and gender theory allows the promotion of conscientisation and participation of women in the communal affairs of rural communities. The author uses fieldwork techniques to subject the practical implementation of ActionAid-sponsored development projects in rural Bangladesh to critical scrutiny.

In Chapter 1, the author starts by explicating her analytical framework for which she employs the theory of the
sources of social power (Michael Mann) in conjunction with a development-based approach to the empowerment of women (Naila Kabeer). She positions her analysis in the context of studies on rural development, empowerment and social change and notes that most empirical studies on the empowerment of women in developing states have been based on in-house project evaluative assessments. These assessments were made by project organizers or by affiliated organizations on the basis of information provided by ActionAid and its local affiliates and did not give voice to project participants. The author directs her own fieldwork under the principle of giving voice to participating women.

In Chapter 2, the author proceeds with a review of the relevant research literature, with emphases on discourses about development, participation, specifically criticisms concerning research on micro-credit, the empowerment of women, specifically the transformation of the research focus from 'Women in Development' through 'Women and Development' to 'Gender and Development', as well as social change. She proposes to study the REFLECT approach in the nexus of women's empowerment and social change and outlines the originality of her approach as being focus on the study of social change in local communities, not in society at large, in short and mid terms, not in the long term.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of the REFLECT program and projects that have been operated in rural communities of Bangladesh. As the REFLECT program has been part of foreign development assistance, provided mainly by the government of the United Kingdom to the former British colony through ActionAid, the author posits her thesis at the interface where international politics intervene into the political affairs of local communities. The REFLECT approach, as applied by ActionAid, is designed to spark social change through the empowerment of women. It was in operation from 1996 to 2004 and has since then been phased out. This has been done through the transfer of operational capacity from ActionAid to local NGOs in Bangladesh, jointly with the reduction of funds of British origin.

Chapter 4 proceeds with a description of the relevant social and political features of Monsurabad Island as her study area. The author explains the administrative organization of central Bangladesh, of which the study area is a part, and explicates the peculiar environmental and economic conditions under which residents live and work in these rural communities. She also discusses core features of social organization, specifically the house and the household, the kin group and the local society, with an emphasis on the position of women in the local rural communities.

In Chapter 5, the author analyses processes of the empowerment of women participating in REFLECT groups, operated in Monsurabad Island, and compares these processes to empowerment processes involving women who do not participate in REFLECT groups. She shows that women participating in REFLECT groups acquired some basic literacy skills and used these skills, among other purposes, for the acquisition of micro-credit loans. As long as REFLECT projects were ongoing, participant women also raised their voices in family and communal affairs, thus putting on display the increase of their ideological power (in Mann's sense) and 'power within' (in Kabeer's sense). She finds some impact that participating women had on the promotion of social change in their local communities, specifically the increase of awareness of women of negative consequences of child marriage. However, the effects were limited to the period of project operation.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that the ideological power enhanced through literalisation processes, did not translate into political power apt to promote sustained social change in the communities. Hence, on the one side, the REFLECT approach helped women advance their conscientisation and increase their ideological power, while, on the other side, women became dependent on the REFLECT groups if they wanted to employ their gained ideological power with the goal of raising their voices in the local community. The ruling elites of the local communities welcomed women's increased ideological power as long as this power could be used to channel microcredit funds into the communities. But the women, capable of acting as providers of the funds, were not allowed to act as proprietors of the funds. Therefore, local elites became able to employ the REFLECT projects for their own purposes even when these purposes ran
contrary to stated ActionAid goals.

In Chapter 7, the author produces evidence that local REFLECT organizers were primarily concerned with fulfilling quantitative targets, in the sense of seeking to enroll as many women as possible in project groups, while neglecting qualitative aspects of the project implementation. Thus, local project surveillance remained loose. Specifically, the so-called ‘facilitators’, trained REFLECT group leaders, informed the author that they had been instructed to treat participant women as children, even though Freire’s pedagogical approach has focused on conscientisation, emphasising the need to convey the consciousness upon participant women that there locally generated knowledge is both appropriate and valuable. The author thus concludes that project implementation was often not in accordance with stated REFLECT principles.

Chapter 8 concludes the study with an analysis of the international dimension of the Bangladeshi REFLECT program and demonstrates that the projects implemented within this program represent an externally generated developmentalist intervention into local communities. Elites in these communities are shown to respond to these interventions by attempting, and often succeeding, in transforming the projects in means to strengthen and solidify their own position in the communities. Accordingly, local elites have been able to use REFLECT projects to obstruct social change in their local communities. When in 2009, the British government scaled down its commitment to development in Bangladesh and reduced funding for the REFLECT program, the consequence that projects funded through the program were discontinued. Women’s participation in community affairs diminished and their potential for promoting social change in their communities evaporated.

審査の結果の要旨

The study is original and highly innovative in methodological as well as material respects. The author uses fieldwork techniques of inquiry to create rich narratives that give voice to rural women. In doing so, she takes a great step forward beyond conventional development project analyses that have been based on in-house evaluations. She demonstrates the salience and even prime necessity of basing development research on the perceptions and experiences of recipients of development aid and local participants in externally generated projects in efforts to ascertain the effects of these projects. She also stresses the need to base project evaluations upon independent research and not on in-house surveillance. She establishes a stark contrast between the overall positive in-house evaluations, usually presenting success stories, and the often critical, if not negative responses from participant women. Moreover, the author points to the implication that foreign development assistance, designed to enhance women’s empowerment and to promote social change in local communities, demands long-term strategies. She also establishes the distinctness of social change in local communities from social change in society at large. She does so by showing that social change in local communities is primarily qualitative in kind and thus not measurable through the quantitative data sets that are often taken to elucidate social change in society. Last but not least, going beyond the existing claims as articulated by Arturo Escobar and other theorists of development, the author presents strong theoretical arguments that local ownership of development projects must not be limited to the involvement of local NGOs in project implementation. Instead, she persuasively argues that local ownership of development projects should start with their conceptualization.