# Master's thesis

# *Empowerment Across Life-Spheres: A Qualitative Investigation Among Women in Rural Bangladesh*

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Are there deviations of the Master's thesis from the proposed plan?
☐ No
☒ Yes, namely: The topic of the master thesis reflects the proposal, but the sample deviates. The proposal focused on samples from two countries. However, due to covid restrictions, I was not able to collect data in both countries. Thus, I applied a more in-depth analysis to a single sample.

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**Abstract**

Despite the growing number of women's empowerment initiatives in Bangladesh, women still face many challenges. We propose a psychological approach to understand what constraints and needs women experience in their empowerment. We first outline a theory-based framework to map influences on empowerment. Based on this framework, we design and thematically analyse 11 exploratory, qualitative in-depth interviews into the constraints and needs experienced by beneficiaries of an empowerment program in rural Bangladesh. We focus on two spheres (i.e., life domains) of empowerment in which women tend to hold different levels of power: income-generating activities and nutritional security. Findings show that in both spheres relational and societal factors are crucial in determining women's empowerment, such as social support and gender norms. We further demonstrate large differences between spheres, both in the type and the amount of constraints and needs mentioned. Women described more varied, and a larger number of constraints and needs in their empowerment in the sphere of income generating activities than nutritional security. Together, our findings underscore the importance of considering women's social cultural embeddedness and the need to take a sphere-specific approach to empowerment, both for researching empowerment and designing effective interventions.

*Keywords*: empowerment, women, spheres, qualitative research, Bangladesh

**Empowerment Across Life-Spheres: A Qualitative Investigation Among Women in Rural**

**Bangladesh**

Worldwide, women face lower levels of power than men, such as through lower income, wealth, and decision-making power, and a higher exposure to violence (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; World Bank, 2022). The fifth United Nations sustainable development goal aims to mitigate this gender disparity and has sparked the development of large numbers of initiatives aiming to improve the position of women, often termed 'women's empowerment interventions' (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation [3ie], 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 2015). These interventions aim to increase women's power in different life domains (i.e., spheres), such as income-generating activities, family planning, and nutritional security (3ie, 2021; United Nations Women, 2021). One frequently used empowerment intervention offers microfinance services to women. However, when systematically evaluated, the effects are mixed (Duvendack et al., 2014; 3ie, 2021). For example, while results suggest microfinance can increase women's decision-making power, it may also induce intimate partner violence (3ie, 2021; Vyas & Watts, 2009).

We propose that to understand these mixed effects, it is important to gain a psychological understanding of the constraints and needs in empowerment experienced by women who are part of a microfinance intervention. This exploration should take a relational and culturally sensitive approach. Women are not isolated individuals; their social and cultural contexts play a key role in constraints and needs in empowerment (e.g., Huis et al., 2017, 2020). Moreover, as empowerment operates differently across spheres, constraints and needs should be considered distinctly for each life sphere. Indeed, women can have varying levels of empowerment across spheres and factors constraining or enhancing empowerment may differ per sphere (Alkire,

2008; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). For example, a woman may have little power to make important life decisions about whether she engages in a job (sphere of income-generating activities), while she may have a lot to say about her food intake (sphere of nutritional security). A psychological, context-sensitive, and sphere-specific exploration can shed light on interventions' mixed effects, and provide insight into ways to culturally adjust them to increase their effectiveness.

This thesis is set out to gain deep insight into women's empowerment by (1) developing a context-sensitive and psychological theory-driven framework to investigate the constraints and needs women experience in their empowerment, and (2) investigating this across two different and relevant life spheres, namely income-generating activities and nutritional security, among women enrolled in a microfinance intervention in Bangladesh.

**Defining Women's Empowerment**

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted construct that has been conceptualised in many ways. Typically, it is defined in terms of options, choice, control, and power (Malhotra et al., 2002). A popular conceptualization of empowerment is given by Kabeer (1999): the process in which women who were previously denied the ability to make strategic life decisions, are increasingly able to do so. Strategic life decisions concern choices that are important for people to live the type of life they want, such as choices about marriage, education, employment, and residence. Central to this ability are three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources act as the prerequisites that influence one's decision-making ability, such as social network, money, skills. Agency represents the process of making decisions, including speaking one's mind and negotiating. Finally, achievements refer to the outcomes of these decisions, such as being able to decide on one's nutritional intake or engagement in an income-generating activity. The current thesis will draw on these conceptualizations to

investigate women's empowerment as a process from being unempowered to becoming empowered.

**Meaning-Making**

Recent psychological literature offers a pathway to gain deep insight into the constraints and needs women experience in their empowerment (Walton & Wilson, 2018). This approach is centred around exploring so-called 'meaning-making', which encompasses individuals' integral understanding of themselves, others, and situations. The approach proposes that meaning-making is rooted in basic psychological motives. In other words, basic psychological needs, such as the need to predict situations, to belong, and to think well of oneself, shape one's understanding of the world. For example, a woman may have the need to belong to a good environment, which may cause her to understand her husband's abuse as an expression of care. Furthermore, the approach portrays meaning-making to function like working hypotheses that are continuously updated when environments or priorities of needs change. The current thesis aims to analyse women's meaning-making to gain insight into how they understand their constraints and needs in empowerment.

**Social and Cultural Embeddedness in Different Spheres**

Understanding women's meaning-making in empowerment should follow a relational approach, as women are continuously shaped by their social and cultural contexts (e.g., Huis et al., 2017, 2020). In many countries with low levels of gender equality, gender norms are strong and prescribe women to take on traditional roles and behaviours (Boudet et al., 2013; World Bank, 2022). This can include being a home-keeper or having the last serving of food. Social and contextual factors are especially influential in countries with low levels of gender equality, because these countries often come with a cultural context that promote an *interdependent* self-

construal (Azim, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; United Nations Development Programme, 2022; World Bank, 2022). This means that in these cultures people typically view themselves in relation to their social contacts, and social factors and structures are central in determining behaviour and meaning-making. This can be contrasted to cultures with predominantly *independent* self-construals, where people tend to see themselves as independent agents and define themselves in terms of individual characteristics. To illustrate, a woman with an *interdependent* self-construal may centre her self-identity around her role as a mother, wife, or daughter, shaping her understanding of the behaviours she may engage in to reach empowerment. Furthermore, countries with interdependent self-construals are often characterised by cultural norms that prioritise collective, rather than individual, outcomes and promote behaviours to support the collective good (Fischer et al., 2009; United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Consequently, social and cultural factors are central to shaping the constraints and needs women experience in their empowerment, especially in many countries where gender equality levels are low.

Furthermore, women's empowerment operates differently across spheres (Alkire, 2008; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Spheres represent different 'regions' or 'domains' of women's lives, such as their nutrition, education, employment, and family planning (Passy & Giugni, 2000). The factors enhancing or constraining women empowerment vary across spheres (Alkire, 2008). For example, a main predictor of women empowerment in the sphere of nutritional security is a woman's autonomy in agricultural production (Malapit et al., 2013; Santoso et al., 2019); women who have more to say in production tend to have more power concerning their nutritional choices. This is different from the main predictors in the sphere of income generating activities, where qualities such as relationship building capability are stronger predictors of women's

empowerment to generate income (Rashid & Ratten, 2020). Moreover, women's level of empowerment may differ across spheres (Cornwall, 2016). Indeed, women tend to have more power in making nutritional choices than in choices concerning engagement in income-generating activities (e.g., Kabeer, 2011; Solotaroff et al., 2019; World Bank, 2011). Taken together, this thesis will focus on understanding women's empowerment by considering relevant others and cultural influences, across two different and relevant spheres of empowerment: income-generating activities and nutritional security.

**Bangladesh as a Research Context**

Bangladesh is an Islamic, densely populated country with over 20 percent of the population living below the poverty line (Asian Development Bank, 2022; Uddin, 2006; World Bank, 2020). Over the last decades, the position of women in Bangladesh has significantly improved (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Indeed, the gender development index has increased by 27 percent between 1995 and 2019, indicating longer life expectancy and education for women, and a higher earned income. Furthermore, Bangladesh has witnessed increases in female labour-force participation and women-held seats in the parliament, and decreases in adolescent fertility rates and pregnancy related deaths (World Bank, 2022). This may be associated with the surge of empowerment interventions implemented in Bangladesh (3ie, 2021). However, despite these efforts, women in Bangladesh, including those enrolled in empowerment interventions, still face many challenges to their empowerment (Banerjee & Jackson, 2017; Rahman et al. 2017). For example, many women are still not able to make choices about income-generating activities, face harassment or have limited freedom in mobility. Thus, Bangladesh offers a unique research context in which combined efforts have improved gender equity, but women still face many constraints.

The challenges that persevere despite empowerment interventions seem deeply rooted in culture. Bangladesh is characterised by patriarchy, granting men high status and domination over women (Feldman, 2001). This gender inequality is especially high in rural areas, which hold roughly two thirds of the population (World Bank, 2021). Men tend to have the final say in decision making, such as regarding household expenditures, or women's social contacts and mobility. Strong gender norms in Bangladesh prescribe women to be shy and submissive (Islam & Akter, 2018). Norms further require women to terminate their education and move in with their families-in-law after marriage, which frequently happens before women reach adulthood (National Institute of Population Research and Training & ICF, 2020). Once residing with the family-in-law, abusive mothers-in-law and husbands are common and impede women's empowerment, such as through restricting engagement in income-generating activities (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006; Rahman & Kabir, 2006; Schuler et al., 2008). These processes are exacerbated by most Bangladeshis possessing an interdependent self-construal, allowing for large social influences on behaviours (Azim, 2008, Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Furthermore, in Bangladesh, women face large differences in status across life spheres. They tend to have decision making power over household choices, while granted less power over mobility and ability to work (Kabeer, 2011; Solotaroff et al., 2019). Thus, to gain thorough understanding of women's empowerment in a rural Bangladeshi context and to reveal pathways to sustainable empowerment, social-cultural influences and differences across spheres must be carefully considered. This thesis will take such a context-sensitive and sphere-specific approach based on a theoretical framework which is described next.

**A Framework to Analyse Women's Empowerment in a Traditional Interdependent Culture (WE-TIC)**

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), individuals are continuously shaped by their environment. We propose a framework that extends Bronfenbrenner's theory to learn more about women's constraints and needs in empowerment in a traditional interdependent culture (WE-TIC framework, Figure 1). The framework should be considered separately for each life sphere, and focuses on levels and interactions.

**Figure 1**

*Framework for Analysis of Women's Empowerment in a Traditional Interdependent Culture (WE-TIC)*
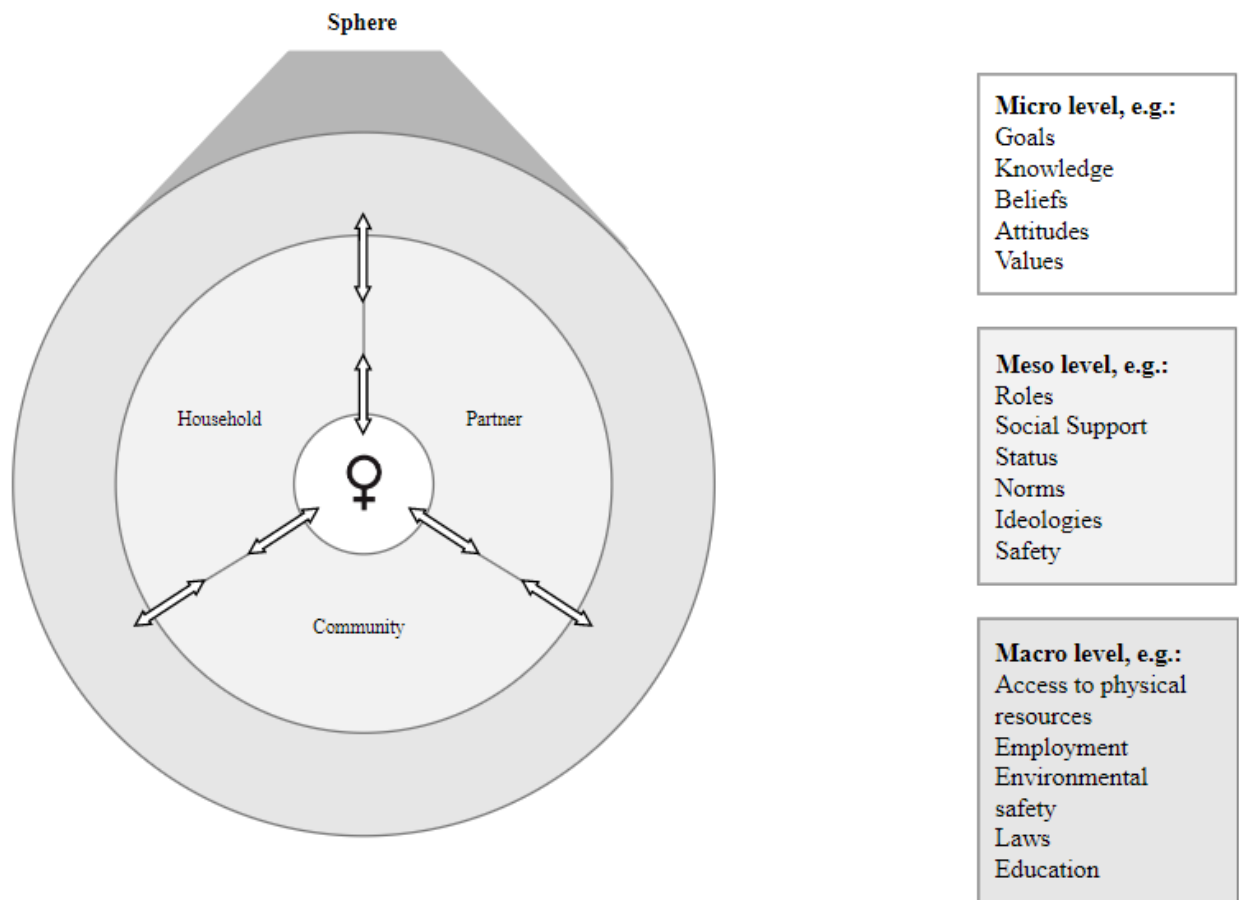
*Levels*

Bronfenbrenner (1979) specifies that factors influencing an individual's development exist at multiple environmental levels. These levels denote proximity to the individual and range from macro level (related to society) to micro level (directly related to the individual). Research conducted on microfinance services widens this theorising to the context of women's empowerment, and shows that the indicators of women's empowerment can be differentiated in macro (societal), meso (relational), and micro (personal) levels (Huis et al., 2017). This research found strong effects of microfinance interventions on personal levels of empowerment and mixed results on relational levels of empowerment, further emphasising the need to consider social aspects of empowerment. When comparing these two models, Bronfenbrenner (1979) focused on *factors influencing development*, while Huis and colleagues (2017) consider *indicators of empowerment* to exist at different levels. Combining both perspectives, we propose that *factors influencing empowerment*, such as constraints and needs in empowerment, exist at three levels: a societal macro level (e.g., laws, access to financial resources, education, environmental safety, employment opportunities), a relational meso level (e.g., roles, social support, status, norms, ideologies, social safety), and a personal micro level (e.g., goals, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values; Alkire, 2008; Cinar & Kose, 2018; Gupta & Yesudian, 2006; Santoso et al., 2019; Schuler et al., 2010; Sell & Minot, 2018; Van den Bold et al., 2013). In a traditional, interdependent culture like Bangladesh, the direct social environment of women (meso level), holds most emphasis and can be divided into three main domains: a woman's partner, household, and community. In sum, by considering micro, meso, and macro levels, our

framework provides a systematic approach to map the factors influencing women's empowerment.

### *Interactions*

Drawing upon the ecological systems theory, advances in community psychology, and Kelly's ecological framework, the WE-TIC framework portrays that not only factors at various levels influence women's empowerment, but that empowerment is especially influenced by the interactions between levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Grabe, 2012; Kelly, 1966; Peirson et al., 2011; Speer & Hughey, 1995). For example, the roles a woman takes are crucial for the resources she can access, her agency, and her achievements (i.e., empowerment, Kabeer 1999). The roles may include being a mother, an employee, or a wife, and are a negotiation between how a woman sees herself, what her social connections expect of her, and the norms within her larger social cultural system. Thus, while roles are typically positioned at the meso level, they necessarily exist at the intersection between the micro, meso, and macro levels. Accordingly, the WE-TIC framework emphasises the importance of considering interactions between the micro, meso, and macro levels in understanding women's empowerment.

### Applying the WE-TIC Framework

The WE-TIC framework (Figure 1) can guide qualitative research on women's empowerment in two ways. First, it can be used to develop an initial list of questions for the data collection. These questions aim to explore women's context and meaning-making and identify factors influencing women's empowerment, such as the constraints women face in their empowerment and pathways towards enhancing their empowerment. Guided by the WE-TIC framework, this list should be developed separately for each sphere of empowerment, consider micro, meso, and macro levels, and allow for the exploration of interactions between levels. The

questions should subsequently be revised in collaboration with local researchers; questions may be adjusted, reformulated, and added. The second application of the WE-TIC framework is during the analysis phase, where researchers can position their findings within the framework to systematically map factors influencing women's empowerment. Through this application, the framework provides a social-culturally sensitive and sphere-specific approach to empowerment research.

**The Current Study**

This study will use the theory-driven WE-TIC framework (Figure 1) to investigate women's meaning-making and social-cultural influences on different spheres of women's empowerment. Specifically, we will explore the constraints and needs in empowerment experienced by women enrolled in a microfinance empowerment program in rural Bangladesh, a context where despite gender equity interventions many challenges to empowerment remain (Banerjee & Jackson, 2017; Rahman et al. 2017). We will compare a sphere where women tend to have low levels of empowerment: income-generating activities, to a sphere where women tend to have higher levels of empowerment: nutritional security (Kabeer, 2011; Solotaroff et al., 2019). We will use the framework to answer the research questions: (1) What constraints do women in rural Bangladesh experience in their empowerment in the spheres of income generating activities and nutritional security? (2) What do women in rural Bangladesh identify as pathways to strengthen empowerment of women in the spheres of nutritional security and income generating activities?

**Methods**

**Research Relationships and Positionality**

The research partnership aimed to conduct meaningful research based on a critical and egalitarian dialogue between researchers based in the Netherlands and Bangladesh. Researchers based in the Netherlands were responsible for conceptualising and designing the study through theoretically appropriate and scientifically sound methodology, and for leading the data analysis and reporting. Researchers in Bangladesh were crucial in adjusting the research to the local context, developing culturally appropriate study materials, and leading the data collection, transcription, and translation. Prior to the data collection, during the field work, and during data analysis and reporting, regular discussions between members of both countries were held to ensure the collaborative efforts.

The team in the Netherlands consisted of a social psychology professor with a German background, a psychology graduate student with an English and Dutch background (lead author), and a psychology and economy undergraduate student with a Brazilian background, all of whom identify as female. None of these researchers had spent time in Bangladesh prior to the study's onset. The team residing in Bangladesh consisted of five local experienced qualitative researchers. All have a Bangladeshi background, identify as female, and are fluent in both English and the local language, Bangla. The Bangladeshi researcher leading the data collection is intimately familiar with the culture in and around the research site. She spent extended periods of time in the research area for previous research endeavours related to women's empowerment.

The background of the non-Bangladeshi researchers has likely biased the research process, as these researchers were assumably ignorant of cultural nuances and had limited understanding of the participants' environment and background. Aware of this shortcoming, the two non-Bangladeshi field researchers took ten days prior to the study's data collection to conduct qualitative research in Bangladesh to gain understanding of the position of local women

and cultural norms. To further limit the effects of this bias, Bangladeshi researchers were continuously consulted throughout the research process. Amongst other things, they were asked to reflect and check if the research instruments were culturally appropriate and if the data analyses and reports were a trustworthy representation of the narratives and themes mentioned by the respondents, instead of a reflection of outsiders (cultural) bias (Berger, 2015). The data collection may have been further biased by all field researchers' position of working women with a whiter skin colour and visibly higher socioeconomic status than the research participants. Amongst others, this could have reinforced power structures and signalled that we value independence and education, which may have inclined women to respond in ways to approve of these values.

We took conscious steps to take notes of the impact of our position on the research process. For instance, researchers noted assumptions in brackets during the coding (Morrow, 2005), analysed the interviews to check where the interviewer may have subconsciously led the answer of the participant in a certain direction, and kept a diary for reflections on how the team's position may have affected the research. In these ways, we aimed to use reflexivity as both a concept and a method; reflecting on our position, limiting bias where possible, and taking a transparent account of how and where our position may have affected the research process (Dowling, 2006).

**Participants**

We conducted interviews with a sample of eleven women from five different rural villages around Rangpur in Bangladesh. The number of interviews was determined based on data saturation. Ages ranged from 17 to 35, with a mean of 27.3 years. As one woman did not know her age, it was estimated by the local researcher. All participants were part of Brac's

microfinance program (www.brac.net/program/microfinance), but for all but one of the

participants this meant that the husband or the larger household had used the money instead of

the woman herself. The one woman who had used the loan owned a shop and was the only

woman who was involved with a daily income-generating activity. Of the other women, nine did

not have an income generating activity and one did occasional sewing. The average household

income lay between 0 Bangladeshi Takas (BDT; 0 euros) and 75.000 BDT (767,10 euros) per

month, with a median of 11.718 BDT (119,75 euros). To compare, the international extreme

poverty line for a household of 4 is approximately 21.311 BDT (217,97 euros) per month [1], most

women thus lived in households far below the poverty line. The average age of dropping out of

education was 11.3 years. All women were married and had children; two women had one child,

six women had two children and three women had more than three children. The names used in

this paper are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the participants.

**Procedure**

*Ethical Procedure*

The study was approved by both the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Behavioural and

Social Sciences of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Participants' responses were

stored on a private drive, recordings were permanently deleted after transcription, and all names

and locations were removed from the transcriptions. Participants received an explanation of the

research project and provided informed consent before taking part in the interviews, which

stressed that participation was voluntary, their responses were confidential and would not be

shared with the microfinance program, and that they were welcome to terminate the interview at

any time or skip any question. Following the local customs, no compensation was provided for

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[1]The extreme poverty line is $1,90 per person per day. This is 177,59 BDT. When multiplied by 30 days and 4
people, it equals 21.310.80 BDT per month for a family of four.

participation. We followed Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research to ensure transparency (O'Brien et al., 2014).

### Development of the Research Instruments

The development of the interview manual and questions followed four steps (for the final list of questions, see the Appendix B). First, for each sphere an initial list of questions was formulated to cover each level of the framework (Figure 1). Questions were formulated in an open way, and left room for follow-up questions, so as to get a deep understanding of women's meaning-making. Furthermore, potential follow-up questions were formulated to assess interactions between levels. Second, three local, female, experienced qualitative researchers revised and modified the list of questions. Questions that were deemed irrelevant for the local context were removed, and questions were modified to be meaningful for the target population. Third, the interview manual and questions were translated to Bangla by a Bangladeshi researcher with experience in qualitative research. This translation was subsequently checked by another experienced qualitative Bangladeshi researcher. Adjustments were made in discussion with the research team. Finally, throughout the data collection, daily debriefing sessions of 1 to 4 hours were conducted with the research team to revise the questionnaire based on participant's responses.

### Recruitment

Participants were recruited in collaboration with Brac's Microfinance program. Selection criteria included enrolment in the microfinance program, residence in a local village around Rangpur, age 17 and above, and being a mother of at least one child below 5 years old. The representatives of the microfinance program invited the women to participate in the interviews, but it was made clear to the women that the research was not part of the program.

*Interviews*

The interviews covered three broad topics: nutritional security, income-generating activities, and women's empowerment (for the exact questions, see the Appendix B). The interviews were conducted between May 12 and May 16, 2022 and followed a semi-structured format. The researcher diverged from the manual and asked follow-up questions where she saw fit, to stimulate the participants to share their personal stories. When a respondent did not understand a term, such as 'women's empowerment', researchers would explain the definition of the word as given in literature (e.g., Kabeer, 1999, 2020), using language accessible to the respondent. The instruments used in the interviews consisted of a printed interview manual and two mobile phones for recording. Occasionally, the field researchers took notes in a separate notebook. The duration of the interviews lasted on average 39.72 minutes ($SD = 8.37$).

Interviews were held in the houses of the women, to ensure their safety and comfort. Young children were allowed to be present during the interview, but all other persons were asked to leave for the duration of the interview. The field research was carried out by three members: a local Bangladeshi researcher who conducted the interviews, and two foreign researchers who were present during approximately half of the interviews. All respondents were asked if they were comfortable having the foreign researchers around. The foreign researchers waited outside in the cases that the respondent expressed discomfort (verbally or nonverbally), or when it was deemed necessary for the foreign researchers to distract curious neighbours and family members to ensure the privacy of the participants. All interviews were held in Bangla, the local language of the respondents and all respondents provided informed consent prior to the interview. The interviews were frequently interrupted, mostly by children needing their mother's attention, occasionally by family members checking what was happening, and a single time by goats trying

to eat the research instruments. In these cases, the interview was paused until the distraction had left and the respondent could continue talking in private.

*Analysis*

To find out what constraints women face in their empowerment in nutritional security and income generating activities (research question 1), and to outline what women indicate would need to change to empower women in their communities (research question 2), we thematically analysed the data using Atlas.ti (Braun & Clarke, 2021). First, all interviews were translated and transcribed into English by the local field researcher and a Bangladeshi research assistant. These local researchers provided comments in the transcriptions to explain interpretations of the woman's words in light of the cultural context.

The subsequent coding followed an iterative process of four steps. First, prior to the formal analysis, the lead author read the interviews multiple times and took notes, which were shared and discussed with the larger research team. Second, based on these discussions and the previously defined research questions, the lead author developed an initial coding scheme and applied it to the first three interviews. Third, the scheme was adjusted through discussion of the findings from this initial round of coding and applied to another set of three remaining interviews. Finally, based on this application, the scheme was adjusted once more and used on the complete set of interviews, which formed the final analysis.

The coding followed both a deductive and inductive approach, as the coding scheme was created from (1) the research questions and the WE-TIC framework, which were developed based on empirical literature, and (2) the content of the interviews. Throughout the process, the local Bangladeshi researchers were frequently consulted for interpretation of the findings and

adjustments in the coding scheme. Due to the illiteracy of many of the respondents and their limited access to technology, member checking was not possible.

<div style="text-align:center">**Results**</div>

**Income-Generating Activities**

*Constraints*

All women expressed a desire to be involved in an income-generating activity. The most mentioned constraint to women's empowerment in income-generating activities was being prohibited to work (11[2]), especially by the husband (10, Figure 2). This was most often due to the husbands' desire for their wives to prioritize household chores, but also to their concern for their wives' safety and worries about possible sexual interactions with other men. The second most often mentioned constraint was that income-generating activities were not compatible with household responsibilities (8), often because they left no time for other work (5). For all women, household responsibilities were the priority. Fabiha illustrates this:

> *My goal is to take care of my husband and my children. If I couldn't take care my*
>
> *children and husband in every situation while working, the income-generating activity*
>
> *should not be done. Whatever the work is.... If one can take the family responsibilities,*
>
> *then any work is is well to do. Taking care of family is the the main responsibility.*

A shared third place of most often mentioned constraints were: a lack of resources (7), safety (7), and societal pressure (7). Lack of resources mainly concerned insufficient monetary funds to start a business or learn a skill (5). Safety constraints focused largely on fear of abuse and harassment by men (5). Societal pressure took the form of both perceived judgement (8) and bad

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[2] All numbers in brackets represent the *number of interviews* that mentioned the topic. I refrained from using the total *number of mentions* across all interviews, since this would create a biased picture as some women had a tendency to repeat themselves.

talk (7), characterised by accusations of shortcomings in women's character (3), or the belief that power and respect are only suited for men (1). Women described that societal pressure induced shame and fear in the women and their families, causing them to relinquish their income-generating activity.

> *In our community, many women go to work. There are few shops where some boys sit and pass comments like 'The women are very 'beyadob' [refers to someone who has no manners or is undisciplined]. They go there to work. They talk rubbish about women. After hearing those types of comments, women feel ashamed and stop going to work.*
> (Iffat)

> *A woman is always fearful about judgement.* (Parisha)

**[Figure 2]**

*Needs*

When respondents were asked what would need to change for women to become more empowered, the most often mentioned need for women to gain empowerment in the sphere of income-generating activities was mentioned by every respondent: support (11, Figure 3). Especially, there was a need for support from the family and husband (11), such as support in household work (4). This ties into the constraint of lack of time to work due to household responsibilities.

> *Family support is very important. Women can achieve their goal if they get family support.* (Nipa)

> *Family support is needed. If she doesn't get family support, she can't work.* (Sifa)

The second most mentioned need was education (7). Women described its relationship to child marriage (2) which is a cause for dropping out of school at a young age.

*By getting her education. Then she will do jobs. This will be her power. That she can*

*stand on her own feet.* (Sanaa)

The third most often mentioned need was opportunities for income-generating activities (6). This included both the provision of resources (2), such as money (1) or sewing machines (1), and job opportunities that are safe (5) and compatible with household tasks (4). Women reported that female-only workplaces would be safe (3), as well as working from home (1), in a local area (3), and not having to work at night (1). Women described that job opportunities which are compatible with household responsibilities are scarce, and a need for jobs that allow them to work from home (3), close to home (1), or part time (1).

*I can work in this area. I will be able to take care of my children. I can monitor their*

*daily activities. At the same time I can earn money. I mean if the workplace is nearby, it*

*will be good.* (Farzabeen)

Personal characteristics were only mentioned by two women, of which 80 percent came from one woman in particular, named Lamyea. Lamyea's profile stood out; she was the only woman engaged in a daily income-generating activity, she had been an entrepreneur in many different types of small businesses, she was married off at 13 and had a child at the age of 14, and she had spent years living alone without a husband. Another respondent mentioned that Lamyea was the most empowered women in the community. Compared to the other women, in the interview Lamyea spoke more and with greater ease about her difficulties, and her responses demonstrated reflection and forms of calculated agency which were absent in other interviews, such as strategies to win the respect of her neighbours. It is therefore noteworthy that nearly all of the mentions of need for personal characteristics came from Lamyea and went largely unmentioned by the other women.

**[Figure 3]**

**Nutritional security**

*Constraints*

Most women (8) made daily household-nutritional decisions, while few made these decisions only on some days (1) or never (2). All women seemed knowledgeable about healthy nutrition and, for example, by stressing the need to consume vegetables, proteins, or a varied diet. Women did not mention many constraints to their empowerment in nutritional security (Figure 4). There was only one main barrier that nearly all women mentioned, namely lack of monetary resources (9).

> *Money is the main problem. Lack of enough money is the major problem. Sometimes the child gets upset and starts crying. Then I have to convince him and make him understand the condition. Because we cannot provide all the things he wants. It is not possible for us to buy everything he demands. This happens often.* (Saniya)
>
> [Interviewer: Do you tell your husband to buy something?] *I mean I want to say but we can't afford much. That's why I never say.* (Raaiqa)

In two cases, women mentioned a belief, which, in combination with insufficient monetary resources, required them to consume less than their family members. The first was that women should eat vegetarian food, the second was that, unlike men, women can tolerate hunger. Such beliefs were the exception, as the 9 other women did not express these views.

> *I feel, they [family] could eat properly. I want to serve the food. Females have to eat vegetarian food, I try to feed them and give/provide them the best food item. I always try to provide them the best food. This is what I try to do. I provide them best food. For example, if I cook 5 pieces of fish for my family members [4 people], my husband might*

*eat two piece of fish or my kid insisted me to eat two piece of fish. At that time, I eat rice*

*mixing with vegetables. I have accepted this. As I have a husband and two kids, I have to*

*accept this fact.* (Tamjeeda)

*[...] the food is not enough. I have children, husband. I will eat only after they eat. If*

*there is any food left, then I will eat it. Even if I feel hungry I don't eat. We women can*

*tolerate hunger. Men will not understand it. If they are hungry, they can't tolerate it. My*

*husband can't tolerate hunger.* (Raonak).

**[Figure 4]**

*Needs*

When women were asked what would need to change for women to become more

empowered, women mentioned needs in many spheres of empowerment, but none spoke about

empowerment in the sphere of nutritional security. In other words, respondents did not mention

any needs to improve their empowerment in the sphere of nutritional security.

**Gender Norms**

Deeper analysis of women's narratives revealed that most of the mentioned constraints

were rooted in traditional gender norms, and many needs inherently required a change thereof.

Constraints in the sphere of income-generating activities addressed being prohibited to work by

husband and family and a lack of their support. From women's narratives, it became clear that

this prohibition and lack of support was generally motivated by the idea that women should take

care of the family, and that men should bear sole responsibility for earning.

*Once I wanted to do a marketing job, but my family didn't want me to that job. My family*

*said: No need to do that job, you are a girl. I asked, what does it mean that I am a girl?*

*Can't woman work? Does it mean that being a woman is being steady [not being able to*

*do a job]? Everywhere I heard that "Girl! Girl! Girl!" [the term 'girl human' is used as a curse in the local context].* (Sifa)

Women illustrated that husband and family support could be increased by changing gender norms. For example, women described that if it became socially accepted for women to work outside husbands would create less problems. Concerns for safety were another main reason for husbands and families to restrict women's freedom to work, as well as women's own will to do so. Women described a need for safe working environments and protection from abuse and harassment. The cause underlying unsafety was described to often be grounded in norms approving abusive behaviour towards women who display non-normative behaviours, such as participation in the labour market. Norms further prescribe how women should respond to such abuse. For example, participants described that when a man harasses a woman, she should stay silent about it, allowing for the continuation of abuse and harassment.

*No, it's not safe. Sometimes, if there is a man in the house, then [a male] can do bad things to a woman. Suppose I am working at your home, if a male member of your family did something wrong to us [verbal/physical abuse], we can't say it to you. I have to be conscious about my safety and [keep responsibility of my own] respect.* (Meena)

The constraint of societal pressure was similarly rooted in gender norms, as described by Saniya and Meena, respectively:

*They [most people in society] think it's a man's job. Why do women do men's jobs? People consider that power and respect are for men only. So, when any woman gets this, they can't take it positively.*

*Due to societal pressure, we can't work. isn't it my weakness? It's my weakness. I need to think about the society. I don't think about coming forward as I am a girl. Suppose, if you have [an extreme situation] like dying, you can't speak up.*

Furthermore, women described that the constraint of a lack of resources was partially rooted in gender norms. The microfinance intervention that the women were enrolled in provided financial resources, but women could not use this money to start an income-generating activity because gender norms prescribed it to be used only by husbands or other male family members. A frequently mentioned need in empowerment in income-generating activities was education, of which the current lack was again often explained through gender preconceptions. Women outlined that gender norms prescribe that boy children should receive more education than girl children, although some women expressed that this is changing with time.

The main constraint in the sphere of empowerment in nutritional security can also be traced back to gender norms, although in a less straightforward way. Respondents described that having insufficient money to spend on food was partially due to women being prescribed to stay at home instead of contributing to the household income and not being able to use the microfinance money to work. In this way, respondents linked the two spheres. Taken together, in both spheres respondents described that most of the mentioned constraints and needs in empowerment were at least partially grounded in prevailing traditional gender norms.

**Positioning in the WE-TIC Framework**

There was considerable difference between the *spheres* of empowerment in income-generating activities and nutritional security. From a pure quantitative perspective, a lot more constraints were mentioned in the sphere of income-generating activities, where 8 main categories were identified with 38 subcategories, than in the sphere of nutritional security, where

3 main categories were identified with 7 subcategories. Not only were more categories of constraints mentioned in the sphere of income-generating activities, they were also more frequently mentioned. Summing the number of interviews that mentioned each category, the main categories in the sphere of income-generating activities were mentioned four times as often (48) as the main categories in the sphere of nutritional security (12). The difference between spheres was most prominent in the identification of needs to strengthen empowerment. Whereas 5 main categories were mentioned 31 times, and 41 further subcategories of needs were identified in empowerment in the sphere of income-generating activities, no needs were mentioned at all in empowerment in the sphere of nutritional security.

Most constraints and needs fell on the meso and macro *levels* (Figure 5). An approximation of the levels of the constraints in women's empowerment and income-generating activities shows: only 13 percent were micro level constraints, 55 percent were meso level constraints, and 32 percent were macro level constraints. For the needs in the sphere of income-generating activities, this was: 13 percent were micro level constraints, 46 percent were meso level constraints, and 41 percent were macro level constraints. In the sphere of nutritional security, the picture looked different, namely: 17 percent micro level, 8 percent meso level, and 75 percent macro level.[34]

**[Figure 5]**

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[3] We are aware that deriving such clear-cut distinctions of levels from women's narratives may be done through various approaches, each rendering different results. Carefully considering each approach and result is beyond the scope of this paper. We merely included these figures to provide an indication of the relative importance of each level.

[4] In the calculations, we used the number of interviews that mentioned each main category. We calculated the figures using the main categories, to avoid giving disproportionate importance to categories with many subcategories. The levels of the main categories were weighted by the number of interviews mentioning each main category. When a category did not fall neatly in one level, the subcategories determined the proportions of the main category that were part of each level, this too was a weighted calculation based on the number of interviews mentioning the subcategory.

*Interactions* between factors at various levels were a common theme across all interviews. One interaction stood out in its importance: the interaction between societal pressure on the macro level and family support on the meso level, which were described as contingent on one another. Women explained that if working women had family support to engage in income-generating activities, the society would gradually accept her situation, but when there was no family support, the society would disapprove of it. At the same time, family support was influenced by the family's perceptions of societal judgement.

> *'I think, what you believe is good and when the family is supportive to your work, then the society will appreciate you slowly. If I don't satisfy my family, I don't work for it, the society will never appreciate it'.* (Madhia)

## Discussion

Despite growing numbers of women's empowerment programs, interventions give mixed results and gender disparity remains a pervasive problem (3ie, 2021). This paper identified the constraints and needs experienced by women beneficiaries of a microfinance empowerment program in rural Bangladesh, across two spheres of empowerment: income-generating activities and nutritional security. We found that despite the intervention, women still experienced many constraints and needs in their empowerment, which were often deeply rooted in sociocultural influences such as traditional gender norms. There were large differences in women's constraints and needs between the two spheres.

In the sphere of empowerment in income-generating activities, nearly all women expressed a desire to work but were not able to engage in a daily income-generating activity. The most frequently mentioned constraint in this sphere was being prohibited to work by husbands or other family members and the most often mentioned need was support to work. Support was

described to influence, and be influenced by, societal judgement. These findings reflect the patriarchal culture of Bangladesh, where traditional gender roles prevail and women are typically expected to be housekeepers (Aregu et al., 2018). Women described that their husbands and family members often restricted them out of safety concerns, which mirrors the high rates of (sexual) violence against women in Bangladesh (World Bank, 2022). Our findings coincide with qualitative research in Pakistan, a country that shares many cultural similarities to Bangladesh. These findings also showed family support to be key to women's work (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022; Saleem & Ajmal, 2018). Thus, family and husband influence seems to play a central role in women's empowerment in income-generating activities.

In the sphere of empowerment in nutritional security, most women were able to make many or some decisions regarding their nutrition. The most often mentioned constraint to their empowerment in this sphere was a lack of financial resources. Indeed, poverty is widespread in Bangladesh, limiting many households in their fulfilment of basic necessities, such as food (World Bank, 2019). When such fundamental financial resources are lacking, households consume what is affordable, restricting women's degrees of freedom in nutritional decisions. Although this initially seems like an instrumental constraint, closer analysis of the interviews revealed that women linked it to empowerment in the sphere of income-generating activities, and attributed their financial constraints to gender norms that prohibited the women to use the money provided by the empowerment microfinance intervention and earn an extra income for the household. Thus, while insufficient financial resources seemed to be the main barrier in empowerment in nutritional security, this may on a deeper level be partially explained by gender norms

When asked about pathways to improve women's empowerment, women did not mention any needs in the sphere of nutritional security. This suggests that increasing empowerment in nutritional security is not central to women's idea of women's empowerment. This can be explained in various ways. First, women may already feel sufficiently empowered in the sphere of nutritional security. It could further be that women do not associate nutritional security with women's empowerment. Empowerment campaigns often stress financial independence, and may therefore bias women to only think about the sphere of income-generating activities. However, since many women did not initially understand the word empowerment, and had to be explained its meaning, it is unlikely that they were primed by campaigns to think about the concept in a certain way. Furthermore, it could be that the consequential life-improvements women expect to experience from increased empowerment in income-generating activities outweigh that of increased empowerment in nutritional security. Further research is needed to disentangle the reason women did not mention needs in the sphere of nutritional security.

Results indicate that nearly all constraints and needs women experienced in their empowerment were relational (meso level) and societal (macro level). For example, important factors at the macro level were access to education, financial resources, job opportunities, and security measures. At the meso level, prohibition to work, social support, and household responsibilities were frequently mentioned. The importance of relational and societal factors reflects the culture of Bangladesh, which emphasises social context through its inherent interdependence and collectivist values (Azim, 2008; Hofstede et al., 2010). These findings support a growing body of research, which stresses the relational aspects of empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Huis et al., 2020; Lanza-Turner, 2022; Van Cong, 2020).

Personal constraints and needs (micro level), such as personal beliefs and goals, were rarely mentioned. This could be a reflection of women's interdependent self-construal, that implies understanding oneself in relation to the social environment rather than as an independent agent. Another explanation that personal characteristics were infrequently mentioned is that relational and societal influences on women's empowerment may simply overrule personal influences. This is supported by women's narratives that described women's relational constraints to be so strong that personal characteristics could often not improve the situation. For instance, women's high personal desires to start a business cannot catalyse positive change when husbands violently stop women who try. Furthermore, many women already possessed personal factors advantageous to empowerment, such as knowledge, rendering these factors neither constraints nor needs. As all women aspired to have an income-generating activity, the findings contest recent developments underscoring the need to increase aspirations to enhance empowerment (e.g., Kosec et al., 2022; Nandi, & Nedumaran, 2021). Concluding, our findings suggest that personal factors do not play a central role in the constraints and needs in women's empowerment in the spheres of income-generating activities and nutritional security.

**Theoretical Implications**

The main theoretical implication of our findings is the need to steer away from a general conceptualization of empowerment, and instead take a sphere-specific approach. We demonstrate that experienced constraints and needs greatly differ across spheres, and our results propose that levels of empowerment do too. This distinction between spheres has previously been touched upon in literature (e.g., Alkire, 2008; Cornwall, 2016; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007), but to the best of our knowledge this is the first paper providing empirical evidence to support this claim. We hope

our findings inspire future research to endorse a sphere-specific approach when considering women's levels of empowerment, their constraints, and pathways towards empowerment.

Furthermore, our findings contribute to the debate surrounding neo-colonialist approaches to empowerment. The current hegemonic account of empowerment tends to reduce it to individualistic concepts such as 'agency', neglecting local variations in its meaning (Cornwall, 2003; Mohanty, 2003). Interventions frequently impose this Western, neo-colonialist idea of empowerment and pathways towards it, such as through individualistic participation in a capitalist economy (Kurtis et al., 2015, 2016). This can carry harmful consequences and hinder developments towards sustainable empowerment (Freire, 1970; Kabeer, 1994). For instance, among women entrepreneurs receiving microfinance services in Vietnam, participating in a women's empowerment intervention was associated with increased levels of intimate partner violence (Bulte & Lensink, 2019). Authors conjectured that this is due to women's increased income. In many traditional societies, wives' earnings are uncommon and can threaten husbands, who can then try to regain their power through means of violence. This may be especially true in societies where divorce is normatively unaccepted, and men feel low concern over their wives leaving them (Hansen et al., 2021). Another example demonstrating the need to consider local, relational forms of empowerment, is a study that compared types of business ownership among women in rural Tanzania. It found that, unlike Western predictions, independent business ownership was associated with lower empowerment and higher domestic violence than cooperative business ownership (Dutt, et al., 2016). The findings in our study support the call for a local approach to empowerment, by demonstrating the importance of social embeddedness and cultural influences on women's experiences of empowerment (Kurtis et al., 2016).

**Practical Implications**

Many current women's empowerment interventions take an economic macro perspective, such as providing access to financial resources (Duvendacket al., 2014; 3ie, 2022). Additionally, interventions increasingly focus on micro level factors, such as promoting goal setting (e.g., Kosec et al., 2022; Nandi & Nedumaran, 2021). However, our results demonstrate the importance of targeting meso level factors, such as social support. Furthermore, our findings stress the need to consider sociocultural influences such as gender norms, which underlie many of the constraints and needs in empowerment mentioned by the female microfinance beneficiaries. For instance, our findings showed that gender norms prescribed that women should be homemakers, and that the money provided by microfinance interventions should be used by husbands rather than wives. An example of an intervention targeting these factors, is a training session for women and their husbands and family members that focuses on enhancing social support and challenging gender norms (following examples such as Helen Keller International Bangladesh, 2013). In sum, changing the focus of interventions towards gender norms and other relational factors seems a promising way to promote the effectiveness of interventions, which carries implications for a wide range of stakeholders, such as intervention designers, implementing organisations, policy makers, and donors.

Our approach underscores the importance of exploratory, psychological research prior to intervention design. This contributes to a current debate in intervention design literature, contrasting 'what-works approaches' to 'wise-interventions'. The dominant method of intervention design follows the 'what works' approach (Cowen et al., 2017; Kabeer, 2020). In this approach, new interventions are generally designed based on evidence derived from randomised controlled trials of past interventions, clustered in systematic literature reviews or meta-analyses. This approach can result in the copy-pasting of interventions across cultural

contexts, which may be ineffective or even counter-productive. For instance, to improve women's empowerment and nutritional security, it seems promising to enhance women's involvement in credit decisions in Ghana, whilst in Bangladesh an emphasis on supporting women in leadership roles in communities may be more effective (Malapit & Quisumbing, 2015; Sraboni et al., 2014). Consequent to the 'what works' paradigm is that the most implemented interventions are those that are most easily transferred across contexts (such as cash transfers), rather than those that are most effective. Unlike the 'what works' paradigm, 'wise interventions design' is based on understanding the complexities of the prospective beneficiaries' context and meaning-making and may therefore be able to identify more effective pathways towards empowerment (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Our research maps beneficiaries' meaning-making through exploratory qualitative research techniques, and thus presents a method to gain the psychological understanding necessary for wise-intervention design.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This research has three main limitations. First, a large part of the research team consists of outsiders which may have biased all parts of the research process. We took measures to counter this, such as close cooperation with local researchers, bracketing, and journaling our interpretations and potential biases. However, despite the limitations that come with being an outsider, it may also carry some benefits (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Fay, 1996). It can encourage respondents to disclose richer details, because they cannot assume researchers' understanding, and it may reduce researchers' inclination to reflect their own experiences on the data. In a detailed discussion on the problems of being an insider or an outsider, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) state that both carry challenges, and ultimately '*the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's*

*research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience.*' Ultimately, we aimed to work from an egalitarian and respectful partnership between insider and outsider researchers (Hansen & Heu, 2020).

Second, the study assumes women are aware of their constraints and needs. This assumption may very well be invalid. Future research should triangulate our findings amongst stakeholders who have insight into the constraints and needs of women with profiles similar to our respondents, to identify factors left unmentioned in the current data. For example, local social workers could be interviewed, and their answers could be compared to the findings in this study.

The final main limitation concerns the study's small sample size, which invalidates attempts to generalise to larger populations or to draw firm conclusions about the relative importance of the mentioned factors. Our goal was not generalizability, but to deepen the understanding of the constraints and needs experienced by beneficiaries of empowerment programs in rural Bangladesh. We took a partially quantitative approach to our analysis, implying that the themes mentioned by most women are the most important ones. However, we recognize that the number of mentions does not necessarily equate with the importance of a topic and that the sample size is too small to draw conclusions about relative importance. Follow-up research could investigate (1) to what extent the findings can be generalised to larger populations; and (2) how important the constraints and needs are relative to one another.

**Conclusion**

Gender inequity remains a daily reality for many women worldwide, despite large numbers of women's empowerment interventions (Duvendack et al., 2014; 3ie, 2022). This qualitative investigation sheds light on the empowerment constraints and needs that remain

amongst women beneficiaries of such interventions. We developed a theory-driven framework and used an inherent psychological approach to explore the challenges women experience in their empowerment, and their needs to gain a better position. Our findings highlight women's social cultural embeddedness, and stress the need to consider sociocultural, and relational influences on women's empowerment, such as gender norms and social support. We demonstrate the importance of taking a sphere-specific approach to empowerment, as our findings suggest women's empowerment operates differently across the sphere of income-generating activities and nutritional security. We hope our results inspire future research to take a sphere-specific and psychological, context-sensitive approach to understanding women's empowerment. In this way, we may not only gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of women enrolled in empowerment interventions, but also develop effective future women's empowerment initiatives, and improve the position of women in Bangladesh and beyond.

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Appendix A

Figures

**Figure 2**

*Overview of Thematically Coded Themes of Constraints in Women's Empowerment in the Sphere of Income-Generating Activities*
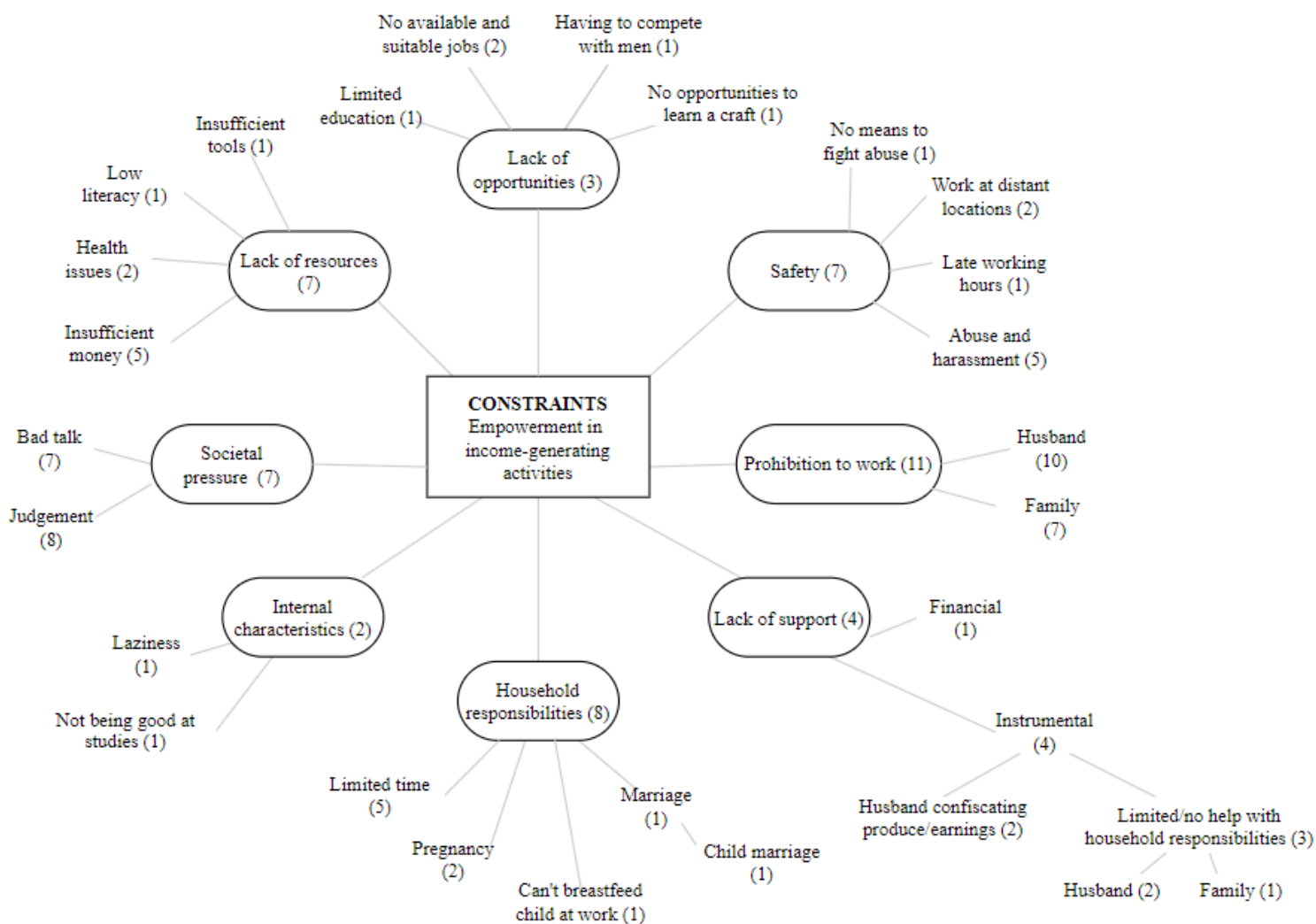
**Figure 3**

*Overview of Thematically Coded Themes of Needs to Strengthen Women's Empowerment in the Sphere of Income-Generating*
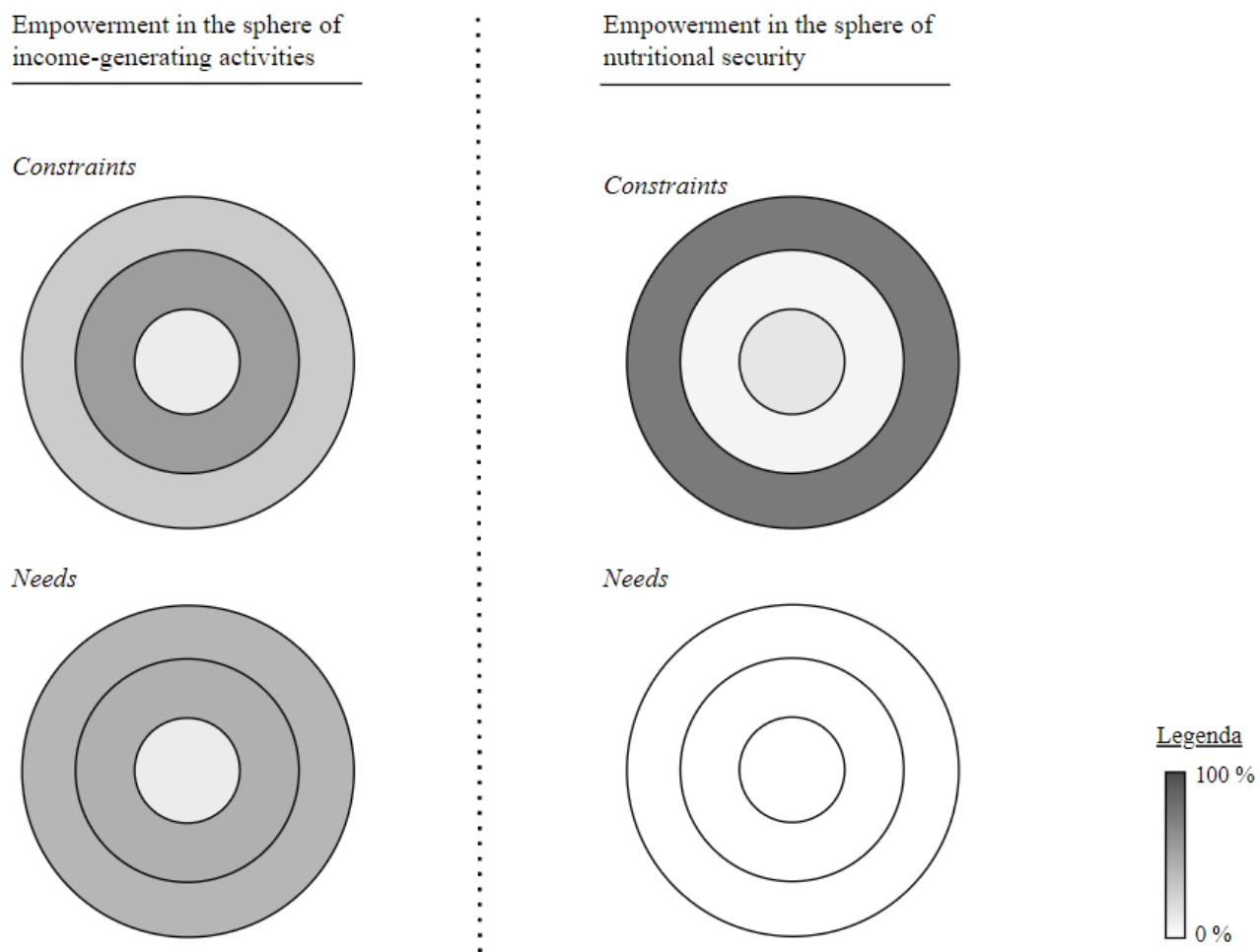
*Activities*
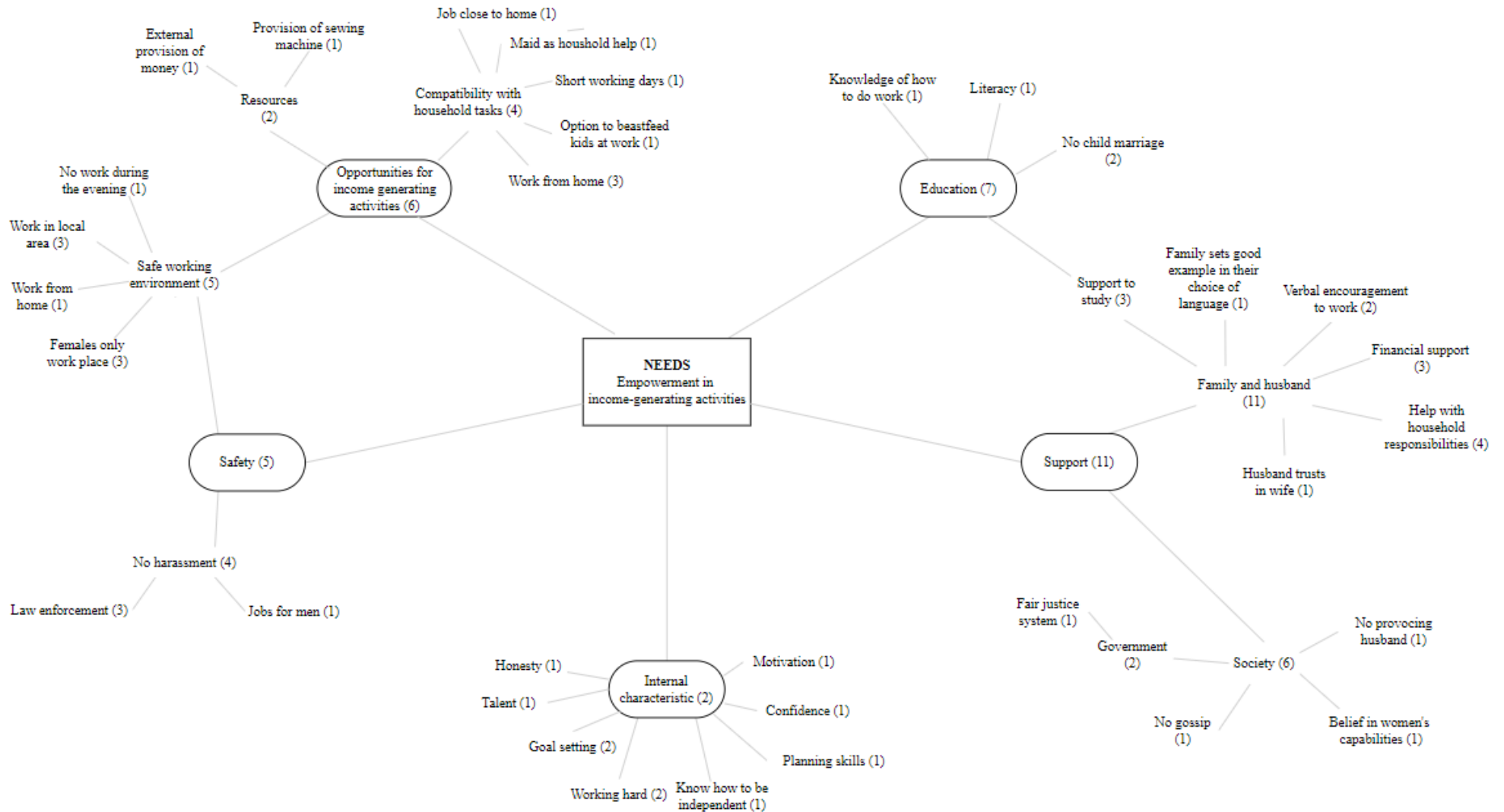
**Figure 4**

*Overview of Thematically Coded Themes of Constraints in Women's Empowerment in the Sphere of Nutritional Security*
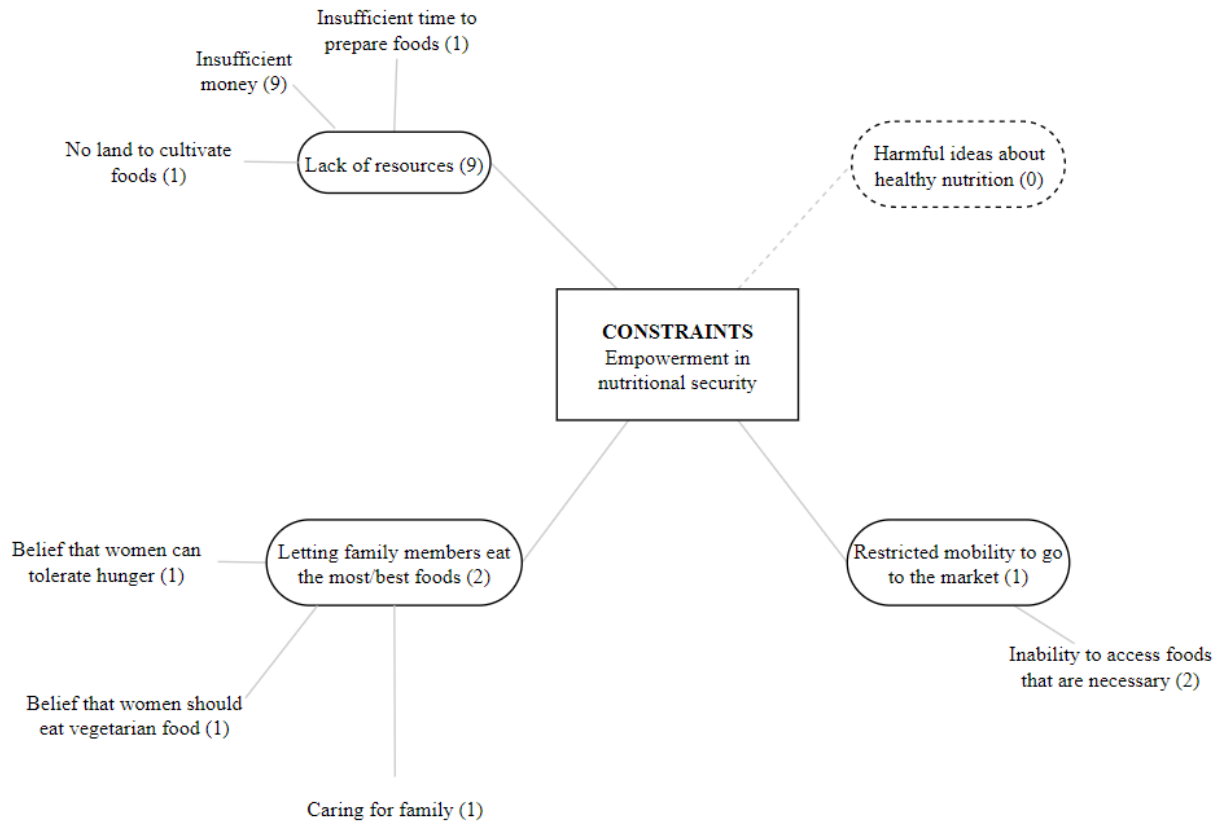
**Figure 5**

*Percentages of Constraints and Needs Across Micro (Inner Circle), Meso (Middle Circle), and Macro Levels (Outer Circle) of Women's Empowerment*

**Appendix B**

Interview Manual

<u>Demographics</u>

(*Instructions for the enumerators are written in brackets ( ) in italic, they should NOT be read to the interviewee*)

| 1 | What is your age? | _____ years |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | What is your living situation? | <ul><li>Alone</li><li>With family</li><li>With extended family</li><li>With husband</li><li>Other: namely….</li></ul> |
| 2 | What is your relationship status? (*Indicate the correct answer if you know it.*) | <ul><li>Not married</li><li>Married</li><li>Divorced</li><li>Widowed</li><li>Other: namely…</li></ul> |
| 3 | How many children do you have? | _____ children |
| 4 | How many years of schooling have you completed? | _____ years |
| 5 | Who in your household has an income generating activity? | (see table below) |
| 5.a | What type of activity? | |

|  | *Husbandry* | *Agriculture* | *Small shop* | *Other* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ *Your family* | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ *Your husband* | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| ☐ *Yourself* | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| 5.b | Types of income generating activity | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|

<u>Theme one: food</u>

(*Please follow the instructions. The interview guidelines include 3 main themes. Please start with a general question, the **bold** ones, and try to engage the interview partner in a conversation. The follow-up questions should guide you to learn more about the topic at hand. The interview for each section should last around 15-20 minutes. We want to hear what women have on their minds.*)

Thank you for your time! We are doing this interview to learn more about the life of women in Bangladesh and their position in society. This is not a school test, there are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in what you do in your daily life.

**1. What is your main/most important meal during the day? Can you tell me more about this?**
[Where do you eat it? Who usually joins the meal? What type of food do you usually eat? Is this food from your own harvest or bought?]

**2. Can you tell me who decides what you eat?**

**3. What do you think is the best food to eat?** [Why is this the best food to eat? *If applicable:* Why don't you usually eat this?]

**4. Who prepares the meal? Can you tell me more about this?** [Who cooks the foods? Who buys the foods? *If applicable:* When you buy foods, what factors do you take into account? Why do you not purchase more different items of food?]

**5. Can you tell me about your family rules during the meal? For example…** [Are there foods that only specific members eat? Does everyone eat the same? Why is this? Who gets the first serving of food? Who eats first? Is there a specific reason for this? Sometimes when someone is sick or pregnant they may need special food, can you tell me how you manage that in your household?]

**6. What constraints do you/does your household experience in buying and preparing foods?** [What would happen if you didn't face these constraints?]

Theme two: income generating activities

You have mentioned that you/your family have/has an income generating activity.

**1. Are you involved in the income generating activity? Can you tell me more about what you do?**
(*You can help her by asking whether she helps on the field or sells products etc.*) [What are you good at?
*If applicable:* Who decides that you take on these tasks? What things or people may hinder you in doing your tasks? *If applicable:* Would you want to be involved in an income generating activity? Why is this? Why aren't you?]

**2. What makes it difficult for women to be involved in an income generating-activity?** [What do husbands usually think of their wives being involved in an income generating activity? What do mothers-in-law usually think? What helps a woman to be involved in an income generating activity? Which tasks are safe for women to do for an income generating activity? Which tasks aren't? How can families get resources to have an income generating activity?]

**3. How are women perceived in your community who are involved in an income generating activity?**

**4. Would you want your daughter/girl cousin to be involved in an income generating activity when she grows up?** [Why/why not?]

Theme three: empowerment

Let's imagine a woman who is empowered. She lives in your community. What shall we name her?

**1. Can you describe her, what makes that she is empowered?** [What does [*name*] do during daytime? In what way does [name's] household get income?]

**2. What does [*name*] do with respect to the food and daily meals of her household? What does [*name*] eat herself?**

**3. What things does [*name*] decide in the household?**

**4. What barriers does [*name*] face to being empowered?**

Not everybody is like [*name*]; some women are not empowered.

**5. What do you think would need to change to improve the position of women?** [How can this change? What would need to change in her household? What would need to change in her community? Who would need to bring about this change?]

**6. What type of support would women need to become more empowered?**