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# Household-Level Analysis of Women Power Practice at in Old Dhaka City, Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This study examines the condition of women power practice in Old Dhaka City and determines the influential factors behind such practice. One finding is that the women in this city are moderately empowered, as indicated by the 5D Women Power Index (WPI). The indices of self-worth to decision making, decision-making opportunity, and ability to control and regulate one's own life show good performance, whereas the aspects of mobility and access to resources show moderate performance. The women in Old Dhaka have aspirations in life and confidence in their abilities. The logistic regression shows that the educational attainment, age at the time of marriage of women and the husband-to-wife age gap positively affect the WPI at 5% level of significance, whereas the income of women affects the WPI at 10% level. However, the educational attainment of husbands and the existence of traditional socio-cultural

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norms have no effect on women power practice.

**Keywords:** age at marriage, husband-to-wife age surplus, logistic regression, Old Dhaka, self-worth to decision making, Women Power Index

## 1. Introduction

Power is an abstract term that has evolved from the cognitive development of human beings. Power arises as a psychological and participatory subjective manner, that is, feelings of empowerment and doing with empowerment, respectively; however, feelings of empowerment originate from different sources of social trends and proceed to the participation of all groups in society (Mason & Smith, 2003). Empowerment involves personal strengthening and enhancement of life opportunities, as well as collective participation in efforts derived from different forms of power practice, such as power over, to, with, and within (Williams, Seed & Mwau, 1994, p. 233), to achieve equality of opportunity and equity among various groups (Sahay, 1998, p. 10). The ability to make choices is the prime requirement of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The pillars of empowerment may be social reform, removal of social barriers, building of social capital, service delivery and many other elements from national and group perspectives (Grootaert, 2003; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). Empowerment encompasses various items, such as resource, rights and obligations (Mason & Smith, 2003) that can be changed with the change of place, time and thought.

Progress in empowerment cannot be measured in terms of any palpably definite scale, but can be conceived from different indicators of power practice in contemporary situations or over a certain period. Situational and/or temporal indicators can be observed, realised and measured to determine the power practice from which the facts of women empowerment can be identified. Inherently, no firm definition and formula for gauging empowerment exists. Women empowerment is perceived, conceptualised and framed from different psychological, social and economic standpoints of development institutions and feminist specialists. Empowerment evolves from individual perception and the surrounding scope and varies depending on different attitudes, such as those of family, community, locality and nation. The conditional variation

of dimensions and indicators of women power practice calls for the bull's eye on actual situations. Women empowerment is a special aspect of empowerment that deals with women, and a number of studies (Revenga & Shetty, 2012; Nath, 2009; Folbre, 2006) and organisations concentrate on gender equality as a requirement of women empowerment. Women empowerment means something more than gender inequality. Women empowerment indicates that the women functioning from personal to international level may be hindered by men, other women, current and traditional cultures as well as dogmatic beliefs. This study focuses on active factors, including gender issues that hinder women empowerment at the household level.

Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority South Asian country and is historically dominated by males, but nowadays men wield less control over the lives of women. Dhaka is the capital city of Bangladesh, and the Old Dhaka region is the ancient part of this capital city. Old Dhaka was established as the national capital during the 17th-century Mughal period. Following British and Pakistani rule, modern Dhaka was developed as the capital city of Bangladesh when the country gained independence in 1971. The experience of Dhaka is traceable to a Western country (Britain) and other Asian countries (India and Pakistan). The fast growing Dhaka has turned into a megacity. It is one of the members of the C40 Megacities to propose common projects, collective actions and innovative solutions for sustainable development (URAMET, 2013). The economic performance of Dhaka affects other countries through direct economic transactions or the demonstration effect, as Bangladesh has been an open economy since the early 1990s. The culture of Dhaka affects other countries and vice versa through international migration and virtually open electronic and online media sectors. The empowerment of women in Old Dhaka is supposed to affect cultural adaptation and development. The diversified performance of women in Dhaka can be a symbol of female progress even in a Muslim-majority country.

Considerable research on women empowerment and the influential factors of women empowerment have been conducted in different rural areas of Bangladesh except in Old Dhaka. Being the capital city of Bangladesh and one of the largest cities in the world, Old Dhaka influences the overall culture and development of Bangladesh and even that of other countries through migration. The original Dhaka is approximately 400 years old, and the city is being extended. The lifestyle

(that is, language, culture and educational attainment) seem different between old and extended Dhaka, as well as between Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh. Women experience auspicious conditions in Old Dhaka but their educational status and life vision are not as lucrative as in other parts of Dhaka City or other developed cities in the world. The diverse lifestyle in Dhaka City is the key point in the study of the situation of women in Old Dhaka. This study therefore focuses on the condition of women empowerment and the factors that affect women power practice in Old Dhaka.

In this paper, the people of Old Dhaka refer to the residents of Old Dhaka regardless of their origin of birth. This study considers the conditions of women only in Old Dhaka and not in their places of origin. A survey was conducted in Old Dhaka to accomplish our research objective. Research delves deeply into circumstances, but true actualisation starts from individual participation. Family is the first and best place to grant and practice women power as an active factor in female empowerment. Thus, this study observes the conditions of married women at the household level to investigate the family-level power practice in the context of overall empowerment.

In the next section, we determine the framework of the study based on a literature review. The third section is the methodological guide. The fourth section analyses the results of the study, which are discussed in the fifth section. The last section concludes the study and provides recommendations based on the research findings.

## **2. Framework based on Literature Survey**

### **Dimensions**

Women power practice is an abstract term. Thus, a clear contextual idea must be formulated and the dimension must be determined to facilitate research. Intellectual literature has been reviewed intensively for this purpose. Several studies consider empowerment as the act of gaining power by previously disempowered sectors of society. Hashemi, Schuler and Riley (1996) determined the following eight variables to measure the power of rural women through microcredit activities in Bangladesh: mobility, economic security, ability to make small purchases, ability to

make large purchases, involvement in major household decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, political and legal awareness and involvement in political campaigning and protest.

Rowlands (1997) determined three dimensions, namely, personal, relational and collective, within which empowerment operates. The personal dimension involves developing a sense of self-worth and individual confidence and capacity, as well as undoing the effects of internalised oppression. The relational dimension involves developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it. The collective dimension involves individuals working together to achieve an effect more extensive than each could have achieved alone, including the involvement in political structures with collective action based on cooperation rather than competition.

Kabeer (1999) considered empowerment as the expansion of the ability to make strategic life choices and as a condition determined by three interrelated dimensions, namely, resources, agency and achievements. The Longwe framework centres on five levels, namely, equality control, participation, 'conscientisation', access and welfare, to increase empowerment (adopted from March, Smyth & Mukhopadhyay, 1999, p. 93).

Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002) found a nexus of key overlapping terms, namely, options, choice, control and power, in defining women empowerment. They synthesised the commonly used six dimensions of women empowerment, namely, economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political and psychological, for household, community and broader arenas. They found that domestic decision making, access to or control over resources and mobility or freedom of movement as the most frequently used indicators, whereas economic contribution to household, time use or division of domestic labour, freedom from violence, management or knowledge, public space, marriage, kin or social support, couple interaction, appreciation in household and sense of self-worth are the less frequently used indicators in individual or household-level empirical studies.

Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) conceptualised women empowerment in the following three dimensions: socio-economic, familial and psychological; they measured six indicators covering a wide range of attributes to determine the level of women empowerment in three villages in the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh.

Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) defined empowerment as the possession

of capacity to make effective choices that translate choices into desired actions and outcomes. They considered the agency and opportunity structure associated with the degree of empowerment measured by assessing whether a person has the opportunity to make a choice, actually uses the opportunity to choose and achieves the desired outcome.

The United Nations Population Information Network considers five components of women empowerment: women's sense of self-worth, their right to have and determine choices, their right to have access to opportunities and resources, their right to control their own lives within and outside the home and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order nationally and internationally.

We designated the components of women empowerment which drive women power practice toward women empowerment in Bangladesh. As this study focuses on the household level, only indicators that reflect women power practice at this level in Old Dhaka are considered. A number of researchers studying women power practice in rural areas have included media exposure and sex of children. However, we have excluded these factors identified as less influential because this study was conducted in a megacity. The self-worth to decision making of women, decision-making opportunity, mobility, access to resources and ability to control own life were chosen in this study to facilitate the household-level analysis of the condition of women power. These dimensions reflect the domestic life extent better and consequently expedite the achievement of the desired outcome of measuring the Women Power Index (WPI). These dimensions contain several indicators included in the dimensions identified by different researchers (Hashemi, Schuler & Riley, 1996; Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2002). The significant positive performances of these five dimensions determine the success of women power practice to flourish in the empowerment of women groups.

## **Measurement Tools**

Researchers have used different econometric tools and/or other qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse women empowerment. Hashemi, Schuler and Riley (1996) represented women empowerment using the logistic regression model with qualitative description. Other researchers (Varghese, 2011; Rocca, Rathod, Falle, Pande & Krishnan, 2009; Rahman,

Karmaker & Mia, 2009; Nasir, Akhtar & Salim, 2007) have used the logistic regression model for different criteria to represent the determinants of women empowerment. Parveen and Leonhäuser (2004) recorded qualitative data in quantitative terms, assigning suitable scores and obtaining ranks from a focus group discussion to develop the Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI). The effect of the independent variables, namely, formal and non-formal education, sex of children, spousal relationship, media exposure, spatial mobility and socio-cultural norms, on the CEI was shown in this study. Haque, Islam, Tareque and Mostofa (2011) analysed women empowerment and autonomy with the 2004 National Institute of Population Research and Training data by establishing an index similar to the Human Development Index (HDI) and central tendency measure. The index was built with the following three dimensions: economic decision making, household decision making and physical movement. Certain socio-demographic independent variables, such as age of respondent, age at the time of marriage, educational attainment of the respondent, educational attainment of husband, rural and urban residence and religion and media exposure, were used in the multiple regression model to demonstrate the effect of these variables on the empowerment index. Chakrabarti and Biswas (2008) applied linear structural relationship methodology to observe latent unobservable variables capabilities and functions in terms of achievements. The study reflects the performance in associated dimensions to indicate women empowerment. Most variables in the present study are qualitative in nature. We developed the WPI based on these qualitative variables. The study considers the WPI as a binary dependent variable in the logistic regression model.

### **3. Research Guide**

#### **Sample**

The present study is specific and captured only selected dimensions of life in Old Dhaka City. A large sample does not promise to represent the population accurately in a city such as Dhaka, where access to respondents is difficult. Thus, we concentrated on sample selection, as well as the intensity and accuracy of data, rather than on sample size.



Studies conducted as early as the 1930s have suggested that parametric statistics with Likert data, small sample sizes, unequal variances and non-normal distributions can be used without the likelihood of reaching the wrong conclusion (Norman, 2010). The resource is limited, and capturing all dimensions of life is inessential for this study; thus, a 10% error margin is allowed in sample size determination. Accordingly, 100 women were selected from each household in the study area with less concern about the non-representativeness of the population, as keen concentration was exerted in sample selection and data collection. The primary data were collected and the snags were kept to a minimum. We selected specific populated residential areas in the heart of Old Dhaka City, such as Haji A. Mazid Lane, Kazi A. Rouf Road and Lakshmibazar, to obtain a representative sample that meets the objectives of this study.

The enumerators were highly familiar with the culture of the area of study. Numerous students of different educational institutions, including Jagannath University, staying in Old Dhaka Region, were selected as enumerators, along with other Old Dhaka residents with different occupations and educational backgrounds.

An initial list of a large number of women was compiled from the study population. We randomly selected 100 individuals from the list. Observing and interviewing intensively were easy because all enumerators and two of the authors were residents of the survey area; the authors were also directly involved in data collection. The observation method was used with the structured questionnaire interview. The enumerators were highly trained in data collection through questionnaire and observation. The authors conducted a pre-test survey, based on which the questionnaire was modified, before sending the enumerators to the field. Several questionnaires were cross-checked randomly.

The women of the sample frame were either tenants or homeowners, between 20 and 55 years old and married. A total of 100 questionnaires were circulated and each household was given one questionnaire. A total of 78 questionnaires were accepted after all screening steps. The remaining questionnaires were excluded because of defects, such as incompleteness, inconsistency, missing information and no response. The data were input into a computerised system after the survey and subsequent screening. The elaborated dimensions of life were studied and the knowledge gap in this area of study were scrutinised and bridged, as this study is the first to be conducted in this area and the resource is limited.

## **Scaling**

The arduous task of quantifying the qualitative human behaviour was performed through scaling technique. The strict quantitative analysis of human behaviour is unconvincing, but the relative measurement is attainable. Different types of scaling were used to measure the relative condition of human behaviour. In this study, the five-point dimensions were used with scaled indicators to measure the WPI. The Likert-type scaling technique, through which respondents are asked to respond to several statements expressing a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the given object (Kothari, 1990, pp. 104–105), was used to measure the traditional socio-cultural norm index. The 3-, 4- and 5-point scaling techniques for different response items were used. A clear and coherent WPI was developed following the HDI construction method.

## **Dimensions of Power Index**

Women power is an object which is experienced in life from the household to the international level, covering the economic, psychological, social and cultural aspects of living. Considered indicators for this study were observed only in the daily household environment because the study focuses only on the household-level power practice. Women's sense of self-worth, decision-making scope, mobility, access to resources and control over their own life were considered to depict the household-level condition of women power practice in the Old Dhaka region. All dimensions have several representative indicators to establish the WPI. Only those factors that are widely known and experienced in the study area were taken. The same factors were included although they overlapped in multiple dimensions from different angles of inquiry. Legal, social and upper-hand political participatory issues were excluded from the index because this study focuses on the household level. The WPI was constructed from the five dimensions through the highly used geometric mean, which represented the percentage change more precisely than any other measure of central tendency. Each dimension index was generated with the following formula, which is the same formula used in HDI construction (Anand & Sen, 1994).

$$M_{ij} = \frac{X_{ik} - \min(X_{ik})}{\frac{\max(X_{ik}) - \min(X_{ik})}{k}}$$

where  $M_{ij}$  = index of the different dimensions: self-worth to decision making index (SDI), decision-making opportunity index (DMI), mobility index (MI), access to resources index (ARI) and control and regulate own life index (CRI)

$X_{ik}$  = actual score of different dimensions

$\min(X_{ik})$  = minimum score of a dimension

$\max(X_{ik})$  = maximum score of a dimension

The WPI was obtained by including each dimension index as follows (Klugman, Francisco & Choi, 2010):

$$WPI = \sqrt[5]{SDI \times DMI \times MI \times ARI \times CRI}$$

## Description of Dimensions

### *Self-Worth to Decision Making*

The feelings of self-respect and dignity must be manifested for a person to be empowered (Ali, 2013), and then the sense of self-worth is realised from these feelings. Saussy (1991, p. 18) defined self-esteem as a complex disposition based on the following experiences: parental acceptance, an ideology that fosters self-esteem, satisfying relationships, competence, passion for life and self-acceptance. The sense of self-worth should be the topmost priority in measuring empowerment because nothing can be achieved without a person's own justification. Women who foster self-worth achieve power and vice versa. A study found that women with lower self-esteem are more vulnerable to abuse (Orava, McLeod & Sharpe, 1996). Self-worth was included in the present study as one of the dimensions of WPI because it is relevant in a patriarchal society, such as Bangladesh. Women's own conscious evaluation and confidence level were disclosed through their willingness to participate in different levels of decision making within the family. The dimension of

self-worth to decision making was included in the WPI as the proxy of self-worth or self-esteem. Thus, the respondent was asked whether she wants to give her decision input in purchasing furniture, spending savings, visiting a doctor for her or her child's health care, family planning, outward income-generating activities and continuing her studies after marriage. The willingness to participate in these determinants of household-level power exercise relates to the self-worth of women. To justify the confidence level and willingness to participate in the power practice of women, we assigned three score values, namely, 0, 1 and 2, which represent 'no', 'indifferent' and 'yes', respectively. As a result, the minimum score is 0 and the maximum is 12 for the six factors. For numerous reasons, women are uninterested to work outside the home and study after marriage, although these two are the most important criteria for women empowerment. We hope they could have responded 'yes' for at least three criteria and 'indifferent' for one. Out of 12, the minimum score of 7 was needed to be empowered according to the expectation of the index value.

### ***Decision-Making Opportunity***

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN, 1995) prioritises the decision making of women in all spheres of life and determines the actions to be taken by governments, political parties, national bodies, the private sector, trade unions, organisations of employers, research and academic institutions, sub-regional and regional bodies as well as non-governmental and international organisations. We re-examined the opportunity to participate at the household level when we observed the willingness of women to participate. To disclose the opportunity of right practice and inspect the decision-making rights of women, we asked the respondents about who makes decisions in household chores (for example, cooking and cleaning), small and large purchases, spending money, own health care, child-related matters (for example, health, education and culture), visits to relatives and outward activities. The dimension of decision making has an insightful objective with these characteristic items, which are nearly related to self-worth. Thus, comparing the situation of how much the respondents are willing to participate with how far they can practice in reality becomes easier. Making decisions about small and large purchases has a huge gap. In numerous cases, women are permitted to

purchase small essential and urgently needed goods and services, but not large items. To determine the gap, these two categories were included in the dimension of decision making. In Bangladesh, spending money is traditionally a task of the head of the household. Other issues related to health and outward decisions are equally important in the dimension of decision-making opportunity. Thus, 0, 1 and 2 were respectively assigned to making decisions ‘excluding the respondent’, ‘including the respondent’ and ‘by the respondent alone’. The minimum score is 0 and the maximum 16 for all eight indicators. We believe that making a decision alone is not the only way to be empowered and what is important is how each woman is treated in the decision-making process. Her involvement in decision making with other family members is a good picture of empowerment that recognises her importance in the family. Thus, we hoped that at least 6 criteria decisions would be made ‘including the respondent’ and that one would be made ‘by the respondent alone’. The minimum empowerment score is 8 out of 16 from the expected participation in decision making.

### ***Mobility***

The freedom of movement has a momentous effect on women empowerment (Hussain & Smith, 1999; Boraian 2008, p. 153). Considering the situation of Bangladesh, this study represents the mobility dimension by including visits of women to friends’ houses, market, hospital, daily bazaar and external workplace. Going to the house of friends is not a simple task for traditional married women in Bangladesh. Visiting a male friend is unimaginable in most instances, although this view has changed over time, particularly in educated families. Women’s visits to hospitals and daily bazaars are common in Dhaka City. Outer workplace refers to the place where a woman works or any workplace for any purpose. In general, markets and outer workplaces are frequently visited by women in Old Dhaka City. The respondents were asked with whom she visits the aforementioned places. A score of 0, 1 and 2 were assigned to ‘never visit’, ‘with someone’ and ‘alone’. Thus, the maximum total score is 10 and the minimum is 0 for the five indicators. A respondent is considered empowered if her total score for the dimension is at least 6, with the expectation of her visiting at least two places ‘alone’, visiting two places ‘with someone’ and never visiting a place.

### ***Access to Resources***

Resource is the highest source of power (UN, 2009; Kabeer, 1999; Hashemi, Schuler & Riley, 1996) and motivates feminist workers to demand equal property rights for women in Bangladesh. Resources may be tangible or intangible and internal or external to the family. In the present study, access to domestic and social resources, specifically tangible and intangible resources, is considered from the family point of view. Respondents were asked to rate their access to the following resource items: nourishing food, interpersonal communication, family budget, control over existing resources and family permission to access social resources (e.g., education, credit and job). Points 0, 1, 2 and 3 were assigned to ‘no access’, ‘low access’, ‘medium access’ and ‘unlimited access’, respectively. The resultant range of the total score is between 0 and 15. We considered respondents empowered if their score is at least 10, that is, they have ‘unlimited access’ to at least one criterion, such as nourishing food, ‘medium access’ to three criteria and ‘low access’ to a criterion. Resources are the real source of power; thus, we emphasise the access to resources, which is reflected by the expected score of 10 out of 15.

### ***Ability to Control and Regulate Own Life***

When someone depends on others to control and regulate her own life, she cannot be empowered although a scope exists. The ability to control one’s own life is not exclusively different from previous dimensions. When a woman has the sense of self-worth, namely, power within, decision-making right, access to resources, mobility and courage supported by society, she can easily control and regulate her own life. A woman can control and regulate her own life if all factors are in a favourable condition; however, when other conditions are unfavourable, women struggle to control and regulate their own lives. Thus, we examine the ways by which women can control and regulate their lives. The respondents were asked how frequently they can do the following: move autonomously, protest against or protect herself from any illegal action, stay alone in any aspect of life for a short or long time and confidently face any unfavourable condition (e.g., financial crisis, natural calamity and disease). Scores 0, 1 and 2 were assigned to ‘no’, ‘if there is

no other means' and 'yes', respectively. The total score ranges from 0 to 8. The respondents are considered empowered if the total score for this dimension is at least 5; thus, we expected the answer 'yes' for at least two criteria, 'if there is no other means' for one criterion and 'no' for one criterion. All dimensions containing the indicative factors for WPI are presented in Figure 1.

The indexes of the dimensions were constructed from the score values of contemplated indicators. We expected a minimum total score value for each of dimension, from which the dimension index was calculated with the minimum and maximum scores of each dimension. The WPI was calculated encompassing all dimension index values. Each dimension with the minimum and maximum scores and the minimum expected index values are presented in Table 1.

**Figure 1 Indicators of Dimensions**

<b>Women empowerment</b>				
↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
<p><b>Self-worth to decision making</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Purchasing furniture</li> <li>2. Spending savings</li> <li>3. Visiting a doctor for own or child's health care</li> <li>4. Family planning</li> <li>5. Outward income-generating activities</li> <li>6. Continuing studies after marriage</li> </ol>	<p><b>Decision-making opportunity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Household chores</li> <li>2. Small purchase</li> <li>3. Large purchase</li> <li>4. Spending money</li> <li>5. Own health care</li> <li>6. Child-related matters</li> <li>7. Visiting relatives</li> <li>8. Outward activities</li> </ol>	<p><b>Mobility</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. House of a friend</li> <li>2. Market</li> <li>3. Hospital</li> <li>4. Daily bazaar</li> <li>5. External workplace</li> </ol>	<p><b>Access to resources</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Nourishing food</li> <li>2. Interpersonal communication</li> <li>3. Family budget</li> <li>4. Control over existing resources</li> <li>5. Family consent to access social resources (e.g., education, credit and job)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Ability to control and regulate own life</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Moving autonomously</li> <li>2. Protesting or protecting self from any illegal action</li> <li>3. Staying alone</li> <li>4. Confidently facing any unfavourable condition (e.g., financial crisis, natural calamity and diseases)</li> </ol>



**Table 1 Expected Value of Dimensions and Women Power Indices**

<i>Dimensions of women empowerment</i>	<i>Minimum expected index value</i>	<i>Minimum expected WPI value</i>
Self-worth to decision making: Min score = 0      Max score = 12	SDI = 0.58	
Decision-making opportunity: Min score = 0      Max score = 18	DMI = 0.5	The minimum WPI value is 0.60.
Mobility: Min score = 0      Max score = 10	MI = 0.6	For logistic regression, the study will consider: 0.60 or more = 1 Otherwise = 0
Access to resources: Min score = 0      Max score = 15	ARI = 0.667	
Ability to control and regulate own life: Min score = 0      Max score = 8	CRI = 0.625	

The index values are not necessarily absolute or at the optimum expected power level, but the minimum expectation of the study is in relative terms. This research work was accomplished in the capital city of a country with a developing identity. Reasonably, on the one hand, the index values should be high, as it is for the capital city; on the other hand, the index values may fail to represent the optimum level of empowerment in a developing context. Consequently, the moderate values were expected instead of having extremely high or low value indices.

### **Traditional Socio-Cultural Norm**

Culture encompasses beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours and traditions, where cultural norms are assumed to be contested, adapted and shaped with the changes in political and economic systems and even with technological and scientific development (UNFPA, 2005b). The empowerment of women is often believed to target the standard norms of societies (Ali, 2013) because the traditional socio-cultural norms, for example, those that support patriarchal violence, act as impediments against women empowerment in Latin America (UNFPA, 2008). –The current study observes how traditional socio-cultural norms are still alive and influential, along with traditional identity, in an urban centre of Bangladesh. Thus, certain norms which have been influential in Bangladesh for a long period are examined to comprehend the effect of those norms. A unique independent variable, the socio-cultural norm index, was developed to understand the effect of traditional norms on the WPI. Six items in statement form were considered for the index. The cultural norms of the respondents were revealed from the response to the following statements: ‘We should support early marriage’, ‘Dowry is a tradition of our society’, ‘A women should not go outside to respect the religion’, ‘Guardian’s understanding of women is not important’, ‘domestic violence is normal in life’ and ‘males should be prioritised’. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) was used, and the traditional socio-cultural norm index was constructed following the same technique followed in constructing the dimensions of the WPI. The higher the index value, the lower the belief of the respondent in the traditional cultural norm. How the socio-cultural norm affects women empowerment was observed through this index with the logistic regression model.

## **Hypotheses of the Study**

Six independent variables were selected to determine their effect on women power practice. We hypothesised the effect of these independent variables on the WPI based on theory, literature and observation.

### ***Educational Attainment of Women and Spouses Positively Affects WPI***

The literacy rate in urban Dhaka is 61.1% for both sexes, 56.7% for females and 65.6% for males and that in Bangladesh is 51.3% for the 15-to-45 age group (BBS, 2013). The UN declared education as one of the most important means of empowering women with knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in development (UNPOPIN, 1994, para. 4.2). The Millennium Development Goal (MDG) also emphasises education and women empowerment in Goals 2 and 3, where Bangladesh is on track to achieve certain targets and has already accomplished some. Basu and Koolwal (2005) defined the educational attainment of the respondent as the marker of empowerment and found that this factor positively affects food consumption, health-related outcomes as well as pregnancy and child-related health outcomes. A certain level of education of the spouse positively affects food consumption and health-related outcome. According to the literature and theory, the educational attainment of both the respondent and her spouse was expected to favourably affect women empowerment, thereby positively influencing the WPI in Old Dhaka City.

### ***Income of Women Positively Affects WPI***

Hashemi, Schuler and Riley (1996) found that family support with credit significantly empowers women. Direct evidence exists with regard to women empowerment through her earnings as a share of the household income (Kabeer, 1999; Islam, Ahmed, Chew & D'Netto, 2012), such that abuse and poverty are the sources of disempowerment for low-income women in many cases (Lord & Hutchison, 1993). Thus, we hypothesised that the income of women in the study group positively affects the WPI.

### ***Age of Women at Time of Marriage Positively Affects WPI***

Realising the negative effects of early marriage, Bangladesh legally acknowledged 18 and 21 years as the minimum age of marriage for females and males, respectively. Approximately 66% of females marry before the age of 18, and Bangladesh is fourth among countries with the highest rates of early marriage (ICRW, 2013). Every year, about 10 million girls get married before they reach the age of 18, and 1 in 7 girls in the developing world is married before her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, with some child brides as young as 8 or 9 years (USAID, 2013). Early marriage affects women empowerment through reduced autonomy and bargaining power; limited access to education, economic opportunities, social networks, health information and services; unwanted pregnancy; higher maternal and infant deaths; high rates of HIV/AIDS and obstetric fistula; and high incidence of gender-based violence and dowry practices (Guilbert, 2003; USAID, 2013; UNICEF, 2013). The higher the age at marriage, the greater the agency of a person (Carmichael, De Moor & van Zanden, 2011). Rationally, we hypothesised that high age at the time of marriage positively affects the WPI, that is, early marriage has a negative effect on the WPI.

### ***Husband-to-Wife Age Surplus Negatively Affects WPI***

The lower the spousal age gap, the stronger the position of women in the household (Carmichael, De Moor & van Zanden, 2011). In their study of West Bengal, Basu and Koolwal (2005) found both positive and negative effects of the spousal age gap on food consumption, reproductive health, pregnancy and child-related health outcome. In Bangladesh, husbands are traditionally older than their wives. Previously, the cultural marriage settlement in Bangladesh involved a significantly older husband, and even a 20- or 25-year age gap was unsurprising. The trend is changing, and the gap between the spouses has reduced over time. However, marriages without age gap between the husband and wife and those where the wife is older than her husband, which was barely possible in the traditional culture of Bangladesh, are taking place. In our sample, all husbands were older than their wives, which reflect the general condition of Bangladeshi spouses. We specified this variable as husband-to-wife age surplus and expected that the larger the husband-to-wife age surplus, the higher the negative effect on women power practice.

### ***Traditional Socio-Cultural Norms Negatively Affect WPI***

Similar to other cultural practices in Asian societies, such as patriarchy and dowries, child marriage negatively influences behaviour (UNFPA, 2005a). Basu and Koolwal (2005) found that ‘thinking [that] domestic violence is not justified’ in West Bengal positively affects the consumption of certain food items, reproductive health problems and child-health outcome, such as anaemia. Thus, we hypothesised that the traditional socio-cultural norm negatively affects women power practice in Old Dhaka City.

### **Tools of Analysis**

Descriptive statistics and tabular methods were used to analyse the data. These quantitative tools of analysis facilitate our understanding of the study results. The logistic regression provided with ratios of odds was used to find the effect of explanatory variables on the WPI. Whether the odds are significantly different from one that it can explore the influence of the explanatory variables on the WPI was observed in the logistic regression model. The explanatory variables have positive and negative influences on the WPI when the ratio of odds increases from 1 to infinity and decreases from 1 to 0 with the increases in value of the explanatory variables, respectively.

## **4. Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The descriptive statistics of the index values of the different dimensions of women power and the overall WPI values are presented in Table 2. Established from the different characteristic indicators, the dimension indices show the conditions of women empowerment in Old Dhaka City in terms of participating in different levels of power practice.

The mean values of some indices, namely, self-worth to decision making, the decision-making opportunity and ability to control and regulate own life, were higher than the minimum expected value. However, the mean values of other indices, such as mobility and access to

resources, have lower values than expected. The WPI value was also higher than the minimum expected. We expected nearly similar values for the self-worth to decision making and decision-making opportunity index, but that for the decision-making opportunity was significantly lower. The mean value suggests that the empowerment condition in Old Dhaka City was not worse although not sufficiently persuasive. The result in Old Dhaka City is not the absolute indication of power, although it maintained the expected criteria for certain dimensions. This condition can be called moderate empowerment from the perspective of the present study. Self-worth to decision making showed the highest score; thus, women have perception on their rights. By contrast, mobility showed a lower score than self-worth to decision making; women in Bangladesh are still inept, and although they deserve to do many tasks, they cannot do them because of their lack of frequent mobility. The value of access to resources is lower than the minimum expectation, which re-emphasises the scrutiny of the equal property rights movement in the country with feminist workers.

**Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Different Dimensions and WPI**

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Obs.</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Minimum expected value</i>	<i>Mean value</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Self-worth to decision making	78	0	1	0.58	0.70	0.203
Decision-making opportunity	78	0	1	0.50	0.57	0.179
Mobility	78	0	1	0.60	0.59	0.198
Access to resources	78	0	1	0.667	0.65	0.196
Ability to control and regulate own life	78	0	1	0.625	0.67	0.232
Women power	78	0	1	0.60	0.63	0.119

## **Comparative Statistics**

Table 3 shows the various characteristic criteria of women and affixed condition for which the power practice condition may vary. The table represents those characteristic criteria and the attributed average WPI value with the observed number, percentage share and median. A sharp conception about the empowerment of women for different groups was found from the comparative outcome of the WPI for different characteristic criteria.

Approximately 25% of the surveyed families were homeowners and 75% lived in rented houses and were from other parts of the country. Women who own their house are more empowered in terms of the average and median power index value.

Moreover, 18% of the women did outward income-generating activities, but 82% of the sample did not. The women involved in outward income-generating activities are considerably more empowered than those who were not involved in such activity. In addition, participation in income-generating activity influences the WPI more than the level of income.

Furthermore, women were grouped according to their educational attainment, namely, primary, secondary, and tertiary. In this study, primary education is from level 0 to level 8, secondary is from level 9 to level 12 and tertiary is above level 12. The higher the education of women, the more empowered they are and the larger the value of the WPI is.



**Table 3 Comparative Statistics of Women Power**

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Observation number</i>	<i>Percentage share</i>	<i>Average WPI value</i>	<i>Median</i>
State of residence	House owner	19	25	0.66	0.67
	Renter	57	75	0.62	0.60
	<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100</b>		
Outward income-generating activity of respondent	Yes	14	18.18	0.72	0.71
	No	63	81.82	0.61	0.60
	<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>		
Educational attainment of respondent	Level 0–8	19	24.36	0.59	0.57
	Level 9–12	36	46.15	0.62	0.63
	Level 12+	23	29.49	0.68	0.67
	<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100</b>		
Educational attainment of respondent's husband	0–8	13	16.88	0.59	0.57
	9–12	26	33.77	0.62	0.66
	12+	38	49.35	0.65	0.63
	<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>		

*Table 3 Continued*

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Observation number</i>	<i>Percentage share</i>	<i>Average WPI value</i>	<i>Median</i>
Husband-to-wife age surplus	0-<5	13	17.57	0.65	0.68
	5-<10	37	50	0.61	0.60
	10-<15	18	24.32	0.65	0.64
	15 =/+	6	8.11	0.68	0.71
	<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>		
Age at time of marriage	< or =18	40	51.94	0.63	0.61
	>18	37	48.05	0.63	0.63
	<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>		
Dowry	Yes	15	19.23	0.60	0.59
	No	63	80.77	0.64	0.63
	<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100</b>		

The educational attainment of the husband of the respondents also shows a systematic pattern with regard to the WPI. Educated husbands are concerned about the rights of women, represented by the higher average WPI value for the higher level of education.

The husband-to-wife age surplus failed to show any systematic trend with the WPI. Excluding the age surplus 0 to 5 years, higher age gap seems aligned with the larger WPI.

The age at the time of marriage reinforces the established fact that women younger than 18 years should not marry. The minimum age for females to marry in Bangladesh is 18 years old; thus, we classified the women into two groups, namely, married below or equal to 18 and married above 18 years old. Women who got married when they were above 18 years old are more empowered than those who married at 18 years or below.

Dowry affects women empowerment in numerous ways. The higher the age of women at the time of marriage, the larger the dowry (Chowdhury, 2010), whereas the decreasing economic role is the cause of dowry (Kishwar, 1999). The literature explains dowry-related unhappiness in Bangladesh (Naved & Persson, 2010; Suran, Amin, Huq & Chowdhury, 2004). We found that women who did not give dowry practised more power than those who gave dowry. Table 3 represents the comparative results of different women groups with different criteria.

## **Regression Result**

The logistic regression was conducted to observe the effect of some crucial variables on women power practice. The regression examined the effect of the education of women and their husband's, own income of women, age at the time of marriage, husband-to-wife age surplus and socio-cultural factors on the WPI. The regression results are the major findings of this study and show that the years of education of women, age of women at the time of marriage and husband-to-wife age surplus affect the WPI at 5% level of significance. The two prior results support our hypotheses, but the third one rejects the corresponding hypothesis. The odds of increasing one year of women's education to improve the WPI value is 1.53 times higher than the odds of not increasing the period of education. The odds that increasing the minimum age for marriage would improve the index value are 1.40 times higher than the odds of not

increasing the age of marriage. The odds of increasing the husband-to-wife age surplus are 1.38 times higher than that of no increase in age surplus. The level of income does not have any effect at the 5% level of significance, but has an effect at the 10% level of significance. The regression result reinforces the preceding result explained in descriptive statistics that involvement in income earning is more important than the level of income. The years of husband's education does not increase the odds of the WPI. Interestingly, the socio-cultural norms index does not show any effect on the WPI with the rejection of our hypothesis. The well-established view on traditional and religious taboos in Bangladesh is refuted in the study in Old Dhaka City.

**Table 4 Results of Logistic Regression**  
**WPI as Dependent Variable in Binary Form**

Independent variable	Odds ratio	Std. Err	Z	P>Z	95% confidence interval	
Own education	1.53	0.25	2.57	0.010	1.11	2.11
Husband's education	0.79	0.12	-1.58	0.114	0.59	1.06
Own income	1.00	0.00	1.69	0.092	0.999	1.00
Age at marriage	1.40	0.23	2.05	0.040	1.01	1.94
Husband-to-wife age surplus	1.43	0.16	3.19	0.001	1.15	1.78
Socio-cultural norms	1.38	2.65	0.17	0.868	0.032	59.82

## 5. Discussions

Women participate in various political and administrative top-to-bottom levels with gainful progress. The five dimension indices, namely, self-worth to decision making, decision-making opportunity, mobility, access to resources and ability to control and regulate own life, are considered to measure women power practice in Old Dhaka City. The average values of three indices, namely, self-worth to decision making, decision-making opportunity and ability to control and regulate own life, satisfy the expectation. The average values of two indices, that is, mobility and access to resources, are lower than expected. The WPI is the metric of women power practice in Old Dhaka City and was constructed based on five dimensions. The WPI satisfies the minimum expectation. Among the independent variables, the education of women, age of women at the time of marriage and husband-to-wife age gap positively affect the WPI at 5% level of significance. The three other independent variables, namely, income of women, education of husband and socio-cultural norms, do not have any significant effect at the 5% level.

The respect of women for their own ability is demonstrated by the higher-than-expected value of self-worth to decision making. Practicing power is impossible without realising and evaluating one's own capacity. The women in Old Dhaka City have this realisation and evaluation. The value of self-worth to decision making reflects the progress in women participation. The decision-making opportunity is also positively in accordance with our expectation. The performance of the decision-making opportunity is consistent with the result of a welfare survey on household decisions, where 70.7% of the decisions are made jointly by the husband and wife, 20.1% by the husband and 9.2% by the wife (BBS, 2010). The decision-making opportunity, along with self-worth to decision making, expedites the women power practice; however, the value of self-worth to decision making is considerably higher than that of decision-making opportunity despite almost similar indicators for these two indices and nearly similar expected values. The result re-emphasises the need to focus on harmonising the performance of different dimensions. One of the crucial questions is this: to what extent can women use their rights once acquired? This question emerged from the ability to control and regulate own life index, which has a higher-than-expected value. All of these three

dimensions jointly assist women power practice in the Old Dhaka region.

In brief, we have revealed the condition of the willingness of women to practice power (0.70 against the expectation of 0.58), the availability of the right and opportunity to practice power (0.57 against the expectation of 0.50) and the ability to practice power (0.67 against the expectation of 0.625). We found expected but imbalanced performance of these three dimensions.

Movement is a key determinant of power practice, but the mobility of women is still not satisfactory because women are either incapable or prohibited to move. Even if the women are allowed to move, they cannot exercise their freedom for various reasons, such as security concerns, lack of courage and lack of suitable mode of transportation. In some circumstances, the mobility of women is allowed but unutilised. Sometimes, because of respect to family and cultural values, women do not prove that they are allowed to move freely. In certain cases, women do not feel capable of moving alone even though they are allowed to do so. As a result, mobility had a value lower than expected. Bangladeshi women are deprived of the access to resources, which causes the lower index value. The husbands or other males are the heads of family in the patriarchal Bangladeshi society. Generally, the male head and/or senior family member holds the supreme right to access resources. The lack of mobility and access to resources hinder the achievement of optimum women power.

Theoretical, literary and general recognition of education is again supported by the findings of this paper, that is, education positively affects women power practice. The targeted primary and secondary education for women empowerment by the MDG has already been accomplished in Bangladesh, but the tertiary level target has yet to be achieved. Thus, this goal must be the focus of policy formulation.

The level of own income has no significant effect on power practice. Women participation in income-generating activity is more important than their level of income. Women become more conscious about life when they are involved in an income-generating activity. The level of income may affect the standard of living, but not the power practice evolved from the cognitive and surrounding attitude. The resultant participation in income-generating activities promotes the cognitive development of women to practice power, but the education of the husband has no significant effect on women power practice. The domineering attitude of Bangladeshi males, regardless of the extent of education they have

received, was verified in this study.

Early marriage is banned in Bangladesh because of its destructive effect on women, as established in the current study. The theoretical and empirical findings point to the need to stop the practice of early marriage, which remains a common phenomenon. Thus, steps should be taken to eliminate early marriage.

The husband-to-wife age surplus positively affects the WPI at 1% level of significance, thereby denying our hypothesis. The increase in one year of age surplus increases the odds of women power practice by 1.43 times than no increase in the gap. Several reasons for such conflicting results were derived from our observations. When the age gap is small or does not exist, the wife becomes courageous enough to raise her voice, although the other family members and even the husband are not traditionally habituated to comply with the preferences or demands of women. Subsequently, family members become disgruntled with the woman, causing her to face obstacles within the family. The result is a reverse effect on power practice through different dimensions, namely, access to resources and decision-making opportunity. When the age surplus is large, the power index shows a higher value for lack of courage or lack of realising the woman's rights. Sometimes, women gain support from their husband and family. The power with the larger husband-to-wife age surplus seems to arise from fraudulence and forbearance, not from actual practice.

Traditional socio-cultural norms are believed to be deeply rooted in Bangladesh, but the study failed to find their significance in relation to women power practice. These ineffective factors may have caused the recent substantial progress in women performance. The finding is congruent with the general observation that Old Dhaka residents are insusceptible to traditional norms and beliefs.

In a nutshell, women can invigorate their own abilities and only need support from their environment. In the family and elsewhere, power works as a zero-sum game (Rowlands, 1997, p. 9), which prevents people from distributing power among all groups of people. If this zero-sum game can be stopped, that is, if a win-win game is possible, the social capacity will be formed in accordance with the valuable role of women.



## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Women power practice is not optimally high, but is at moderate or tolerable level in Old Dhaka City. The lives of women have been changing. Their high self-worth to decision is a sign of growing consciousness. Over time, women have been increasingly involved in decision making. Their mobility is unconvincing, but is close to our expectation. We hope that the mobility of women will increase along with the improvements in facilities, such as reserved seats for women in public transport and law enforcement to stop sexual harassment against women. Access to resources is the key to power but women are not allowed to perform well, as indicated by a value lower than expected. Women can regulate and control their own life according to the expectation of the study, but sustained support from society is necessary for continued performance. Women do well in regulating and controlling their lives even though the overall performance is not at the highest satisfactory level. Using the results of this study, we recommend certain steps to improve the power practice of women.

Women have perceptions about their rights and abilities. Sustained support from the state and society is necessary to motivate their perceptions. The education of women should not be compromised, and the ongoing support for women's education should be intensified. Involvement in income-generating activities should be expanded because of its supportive role in women power practice and because it has a similar trend with the WPI and a significant effect at the 5% level.

The law on the minimum age of marriage must be followed strictly. Campaigning against early marriage may help stop this tradition. Support to women should be provided in the form of income-related activities to make them active stakeholders of the economy.

When women feel too insecure to move beyond their homes, the benefit from mobility decreases. A good working environment, as well as reliable traffic and security systems, should be provided to encourage the mobility of Bangladeshi women.

The deep-rooted importance of women at the family level is essential to improve their access to resources. The right of women to inherit property, which can fortify the role of women in the family, should be respected. Dowry practices should be stopped to ensure women's empowerment. Thus, objective law enforcement must be strengthened.

Policy steps that have already been taken, including the provision of

transport facilities for women, public and private partnerships in women's entrepreneurial arrangement as well as rules against sexual harassment, deserve appreciation because they support the goal of female empowerment in Bangladesh. Thus, this study recommends keeping these policies operational and introducing other effective strategies to promote the abilities and protect the rights of women.

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