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Targeting “Destitute” Women to Promote Food Security and
Empowerment: A Comparative Study of the World Food Programme’s
Vulnerable Group Development in Rural Bangladesh and Current Theory
on Gender-Aware Planning

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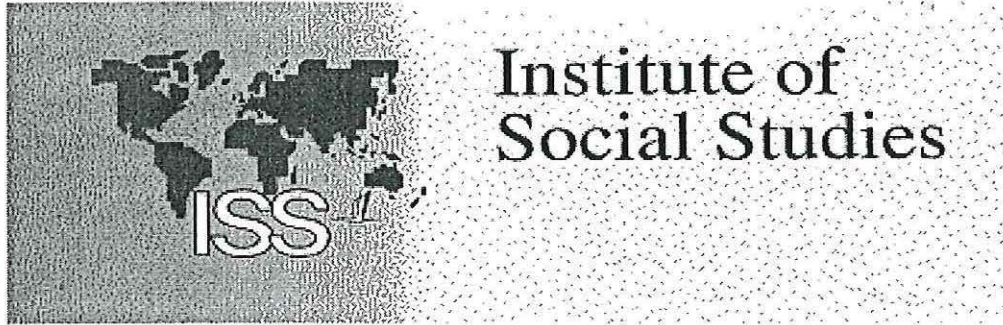
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Abstract

Increasing recognition of the linkages between population dynamics, human well-being and women's human rights at the international level, through conventions such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo, has been key in stimulating the emergence of increasing numbers of development initiatives which state the empowerment of women among their goals.

Many actors involved in food security and poverty alleviation efforts in rural Bangladesh have incorporated a gender aware approach aiming to empower poor women through their policy interventions in an attempt to go beyond the "unexamined assumptions and preconceptions which form the 'common sense' of so much of traditional top-down development planning" (Kabeer, 1996; 5). The World Food Programme (WFP) has intervened in rural Bangladesh through the Vulnerable Group Development Programme (VGD) which targets "destitute" women in the rural areas of Bangladesh with a food aid and development package. However, how a target group such as destitute women and their needs are conceptualized and approached through an intervention results from how the VGD programme is formulated and designed from within the WFP institutional machinery to address the needs of that group.

This paper attempts to fill the gap between the actual planning practice of the VGD programme intervention and current theory about the design of gender-sensitive policy. Thus the objective of this study is to compare the approach of the World Food Programme to targeting, needs identification and empowerment of destitute women in rural Bangladesh, as embodied by the VGD programme, to current theory on the formation of gender-aware policy interventions.

In comparing the WFP approach to women's economic and social empowerment with current theory from the field of gender planning this study concluded that differences between the two existed and that the WFP use of the concept empowerment was fragmented in its emphasis primarily upon economic forms of empowerment. More intangible forms of empowerment, that are helped or hindered by hierarchical social relations of gender and class in that context, should also be taken into account in the formulation and design of future interventions.

A participatory planning process in which members of the target group as well as other interest groups from all levels of society are approached for their views and input would strengthen the potential impact of the programme not only through a more accurate view of the needs of the target group, but also through the identification of potential obstacles or sources of support within the wider community to the programme. Such a process could also contribute towards a increased awareness among men and members of other classes about the gender specific processes of poverty that prevail in rural Bangladesh.

List of Abbreviations

BRAC - Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee

DAWN – Development Alternatives for a New Era

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization

GLEW – Group Leaders and Extension Workers sub-project of the VGD programme

ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development

IG – Income Generation sub-project of the VGD programme

IF – Institutional Feeding sub-project of the VGD programme

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

VGD – Vulnerable Group Development Programme

WFP – World Food Programme

WTC – Women’s Training Centers sub-project of the VGD programme

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The Empowerment of “Destitute” Women As a Developmental End

1.0 Background

The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 resulted in a Programme of Action that gave credence to issues which had not previously been formally included in the international discourse on population and development. Although many international actors had been lobbying for some time for the inclusion of reproductive health and rights and human well-being as a development end in itself and for women’s empowerment to be embraced in an international convention, the ICPD Programme of Action was the first inter-governmental convention to underscore that ‘[t]he empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself’ (UN, 1995: Para. 41.). Further to this point, the Programme of Action states that ‘[a]dvancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women,...and ensuring women’s ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population and development-related programmes’ (UN, 1994: 12).

The recognition of the linkages between population dynamics, human well-being and women’s human rights at the international level has been key in stimulating the emergence of increasing numbers of development initiatives which state the empowerment of women among their goals. Whether an intervention’s objective is to reduce population growth or to promote increased human well-being (as indicated by decreases in infant and maternal mortality rates or increases in food security and nutritional status), policy makers are increasingly focusing on the socio-economic status, position and role of women in the formulation and design of population policy interventions.

The achievement of the former end has been eschewed by many in the population and development field for being driven by Malthusian concerns about carrying capacity and optimal population size which gave rise to population and fertility control approaches to population and development thinking and planning. Achievement of the second end, increased human wellbeing, however, locates people and their welfare as the central objective of an intervention, thereby highlighting a variety of means which take account of people's perceived needs and interests as they themselves define them.

In this regard, the eradication of poverty has increasingly become the focus of population and development-related activities ranging from income generation and human resource development programs to women-targeted programs, which include social and economic empowerment among their objectives. It is the hope that through interventions that aim to reinforce people's livelihoods and well being, thus facilitating their empowerment, poverty will be reduced. In her recent work on empowerment and social relations, Naila Kabeer highlights the significance of the impact that relations of subordination and dependency have on the well-being and security of poor and marginalized people (Kabeer, 1996). Identifying and addressing these more 'intangible' aspects of well-being, which vary across contexts, in combination with material aspects of well-being such as assets, finance, access to public goods, and infrastructure, are essential to the strengthening of people's capacity for determining their own well-being (Kabeer, 1996). This in turn, is often crucially related to gender relations and the forces that determine them.

In Bangladesh, where poverty and food insecurity remain the greatest challenges to human well-being and development, evidence indicates that food security and poverty are experienced differently by men and women due to their gender-differentiated roles and responsibilities within the household and community (Agarwal, 1994; Kabeer, 1996; Katona-Apte, 1988; Kynch, 1998; Tinker, 1990). These differences in experience, therefore, necessitate critical analysis of the issues of poverty alleviation

and food security from a gender perspective¹. Many actors involved in food security and poverty alleviation efforts in rural Bangladesh have incorporated a gender perspective into their policy interventions in an attempt to go beyond the “unexamined assumptions and preconceptions which form the ‘common sense’ of so much of traditional top-down development planning” (Kabeer, 1996; 5).

1.1 Statement of the problem

Increasingly, development programs, spurred on by greater awareness among policy makers about the gender differentiated experience of poverty, have sought to address the needs of what have come to be labeled as “vulnerable groups”. In rural Bangladesh the outcome of the increased awareness about the gender-related dimensions of poverty and food insecurity has also resulted in direct attention being given to one group that the World Food Programme (WFP), among others, refers to as “destitute” women. Along with the label destitute go certain context-specific socio-economic attributes that are employed as a means of determining who is included, or excluded, from the targeted group. Socio-economic attributes used to identify target beneficiaries for development assistance through the WFP’s initiative include the amount of land or other assets that one possesses, marital status, and the type of labor one is engaged in, such as daily wage or contract labor (Katona-Apte, 1988; Wood, 1994). WFP’s selection of these qualifying attributes stems from that institution’s conceptualization of what the label destitute signifies in the context of rural Bangladesh.

The World Food Programme has intervened in Bangladesh through the Vulnerable Group Development Programme (VGD). As one of the main food aid and development assistance providers in Bangladesh, the WFP funds the multi-lateral VGD program that targets destitute women, identified by the WFP as the group most severely affected by extreme poverty in Bangladesh (WFP, 1995b). The approach of

¹ Gender perspective – a viewpoint which, when applied in the development planning processes, takes account of the differential experiences of women and men in the development process due to socially defined norms, customs, expectations about behavior about the role of a man or woman in a given society. This perspective can be incorporated into the analytical framework of the gender planning framework which offers planners and policy makers the tools needed to design ‘gender-aware’

the WFP to formulation, design and implementation of policy to assist the target group, as with any institution, is influenced by that institution's rules, norms, practices and procedures (Kabeer, 1996). In turn, how a target group such as destitute women and their needs are conceptualized and approached through an intervention results from how the VGD programme is formulated and designed from within the WFP institutional machinery to address the needs of that group.

Despite efforts to incorporate a gender perspective into development policy interventions, many policies that target women are formulated using existing, or 'traditional', planning frameworks that are often still "premised on the notion of a male development actor" (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1996: 5) and on "male-centered notions of well-being and agency" (Kabeer, 1996: 11). Theory that is designed to help policy makers create more mainstream a gender-aware policy approach to designing interventions that take the gender-differentiated dimensions of poverty, food security and well-being into account can prove helpful in assessing the design of programs for their consistency in addressing the gender dimensions of food insecurity. Increased attempts to bridge the gap between development policy and theory regarding projects that target poor women are needed to highlight how projects can better meet the perceived needs of the women involved². This paper attempts to fill the gap between a current program intervention and current theory about the design of gender-sensitive policy.

1.2 Justification for the study

Poverty in rural Bangladesh is experienced in gender specific ways that have proven difficult to address due to the social embeddedness of gender relations (Agarwal, 1994; Katona-Apte, 1988; Kynch, 1998; Tinker, 1990). An analysis of development policy from a gendered perspective may illuminate whether the policy objectives correspond to the needs of the target-group as they perceive their needs themselves. This type of insight can contribute to development organizations' improvement of the

interventions which are based on the realities of women's and men's roles, responsibilities and abilities in a more aware manner.

² 'Perceived needs' refers in this context to needs, both basic and secondary, which women themselves delimit as opposed to those needs which an institution has identified for policy and planning purposes as needing to be fulfilled. These are referred to as 'defined needs' in this context.

impact of their food security programs.

Women's empowerment, poverty alleviation and food security are more frequently being linked to the discourse on population and development. Increasingly, research is linking women's empowerment and autonomy, to indicators of well-being ranging from declines in maternal and child mortality rates to increased child nutrition, and to higher life expectancy and better reproductive health for women (FAO, 1996; Haddad, 1999). Amartya Sen has written, for example, that differential mortality rates (and thus life expectancy) of women and men "can be used to throw light on some of the coarsest aspects of gender-related inequality" (Sen, 1998). The ICPD Programme of Action called for more gender disaggregated information and data that would help researchers to more clearly understand population issues, not primarily in regard to reducing fertility levels, but rather as a means of improving the well-being of people. In as much as women's position vis-à-vis men is one of subordination both economically and socially in many societies, the focus of the ICPD Programme of Action upon women's empowerment highlights a key aspect of women's well-being. The increased empowerment of women to determine their own state of well-being can enable women, not only to make use of the opportunities available to them, but also to shape the context in which those opportunities are framed (Germain and Kyte, 1995). In this manner, women do not remain the passive recipients of aid interventions, but, rather, are active participants in the process of identifying their own needs and determining the means by which such needs can best be fulfilled. This focus resulted in Chapter IV of the ICPD Program of Action being dedicated solely to the issue of gender equality, equity and the empowerment of women, while Chapter VIII, entitled "Health, Morbidity and Mortality", addresses the need for "rapid, substantial reduction in maternal mortality and morbidity with greater emphasis placed on maternal health within the primary health care system" and the necessity of empowering women "to protect their own health" (Germain and Kyte, 1995:16).

In rural Bangladesh, high maternal and infant mortality rates, high levels of malnutrition and a female life expectancy that is lower than that of their male counterparts (Bangladesh is one of the few countries with a lower life expectancy for females than males), all give evidence of the gender differentiated experience of poverty and food security in that context. Thus, the Food and Agricultural

Organization has noted, “gender concerns need to be specifically mainstreamed in policies and programmes related to population and food security” (FAO, 1996) precisely because “women’s empowerment will be central to achieving initiatives aimed at raising levels of nutrition, improving production and distribution of food and agricultural products, and enhancing the living conditions of rural populations” (FAO, 1999). But, much depends on how target groups are defined (and identified) and what such definitions reveal about the institutions that address these issues.

1.3 Research Objectives

How a target group is conceptualized or defined and how the needs of that group are identified by an institution has an impact on how the latter’s policy intervention is formulated and designed to benefit the target group. Recent theory regarding the formulation and design of development interventions addresses precisely this issue of who defines the objectives of an intervention and how the objectives are conceptualized. The increased awareness about the need for gender-aware policy mentioned earlier has led to more transparent and participatory planning processes, which incorporate the needs and interests of the program beneficiaries as they have themselves expressed them, being developed.

Examining how the needs of destitute women in rural Bangladesh have been identified through the “gendered” VGD policy of the World Food Program in light of current theory on formulating gender-aware policy, can provide a greater understanding of how this group has been approached through the WFP policy intervention. Thus the objective of this study is to compare the approach of the World Food Program to targeting, needs identification and empowerment of destitute women in rural Bangladesh, as embodied in the VGD program, to current theory on the formation of gender-aware policy interventions. It is intended as an exercise in working with policy and theory from the field of development studies in order to examine how they compare. By examining the VGD policy intervention in terms of current theory on social relations and women’s empowerment, this paper will examine how such policy reflects the real needs of the target group.

1.4 Research questions

1. What is the prevalence and geographical distribution of food insecurity in rural Bangladesh and who are the identified vulnerable groups?
2. What current methodologies/approaches are used to identify target groups and their needs in food security programs with particular reference to the World Food Program and destitute women as a target group in the WFP program in Bangladesh?
3. What are the entitlements of women in rural Bangladesh, and their relevance to household food security?
4. The stated goal of the World Food Program intervention in Bangladesh is the “the economic and...social empowerment” of destitute women (WFP, 1995b:2). How has the WFP defined destitute women and their needs through the VGD program? How does this reflect WFP’s approach to fulfilling those needs?

1.5 Definition of concepts

The research will be conducted on the basis of the following concepts:

- (a) Destitute – lacking something needed, or extremely poor (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1974:201). In the *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, Judith Katona-Apte defines a “destitute” woman as a “female without adequate means of support” who “is considered destitute if she (1) either is widowed or abandoned or has only a disabled husband and (2) is functionally landless (owning less than 0.4 acres of cultivable land) and without any assets” (Katona-Apte, 1988:1). This definition closely corresponds with both that of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the World Food Program. One current sub-project of the WFP VGD defines ‘destitute’ as (1) functionally landless (own less than 0.5 acres of agricultural land) (2) have an extremely low household income per month (3) be from households which rely on daily or casual labor (4) and preference is given to female heads of households, women who are divorced/deserted/separated from their husbands, or whose husbands are disabled (Khan, 1999:1).
- (b) Food security - Food security is defined by the World Bank as “access by all

people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food insecurity, in turn, is the lack of access to enough food” (World Bank, 1986:1).

- (c) Gender dimensions of poverty – Gender, as opposed to sex, denotes the social meaning of being female or male in contrast to physiological differences between the two sexes. Gender dimensions of poverty, therefore, refer to those aspects of poverty which are gender-specific and which derive from women or men’s socially ascribed gender roles.
- (d) Gender interests – interests that arise from women and men’s social roles which are defined not primarily by their physiological sex, but by the role imputed upon them by social norms, rules, expectations and restrictions.
- (e) Empowerment – There are many variations on the definition of empowerment. However, the definition useful for this study derives from the work of scholars from the South and active in the field of development as this is the arena of enquiry that this paper deals with. Empowerment was thus defined by Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) in 1985 as “a transformation of existing social relations from the vantage point of the most oppressed sections of our societies” (Kabeer, 1994:84) which requires the “...transformation of structures of subordination through radical changes in law, property rights, and other institutions that reinforce and perpetuate...” one group’s domination and another’s subordination (Batliwala, 1994: 129).

1.6 Sources of data and methodology

In order to establish a background on how destitute women have been defined by the World Food Program’s Vulnerable Group Development Programme, the policy document of the VGD programme is examined for its content pertaining to the target group destitute women. Other secondary sources of data includes statistics from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the World Food Programme. Qualitative accounts from literature sources are used to gain insight into the perspective of the women in the target group on their needs and interests. Conducting direct interviews is beyond the scope of this study therefore, qualitative data from secondary sources has been employed for the purpose of interpreting the target’s groups own needs from their perspective.

A theoretical framework for examining how the target group, destitute women and their needs are identified in WFP policy interventions is developed from current theory on target groups, needs identification and the linkage between these concepts and the concept of empowerment. Theory from the field of development studies regarding these concepts is first reviewed for its applicability to the issue of targeting and the needs of a target group. The resulting theoretical framework is then applied to the approach of the WFP, as embodied in their VGD programme in rural Bangladesh. This paper is not intended as an impact assessment of the VGD programme. Rather, it is an exercise in applying current development theory to a current development programme policy approach in the hopes of bridging any existing gaps between the two regarding the mainstreaming of a gender perspective into development policy and practice.

1.7 Contribution to the theoretical and the policy-making fields

The theoretical contribution of this study is a new way of looking at destitute women and what their needs and interests entail. The contributions to the policy-making field are informing WFP about different approaches to policy making and exploring to what extent the findings of this study can help to strengthen WFP formulation of gender-aware programs in a constructive manner. In confronting policy with current theory on planning gender-aware interventions a contribution will hopefully be made to the improvement of the WFP approach to poverty alleviation and the economic and social empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh.

1.8 Scope and limitation of the research

This paper is limited in its scope in that it is based primarily upon secondary data and literature sources for its background and content concerning the socio-economic information regarding women and their lives in rural Bangladesh. Furthermore, conducting personal interviews, or other primary data collection methods were beyond the scope of this study, therefore the target group's perceived needs will be inferred from secondary data sources such as literature based upon interviews and similar primary data that has been written by and about poor women in rural

Bangladesh.

In order to be able to examine the WFP approach to targeting destitute women, the VGD project policy document, entitled “Project Bangladesh 2226 (Exp.7) Vulnerable group development: support to rural women to move out of extreme poverty”, dating from 1995 will be used. Although updates and amendments may have been made to the document and project in the intervening years, it is the document made available on the WFP’s web site that details their current development activities in Bangladesh (WFP, 1995a). For the purposes of this study, this is the document to be used as the representation of the WFP’s approach to destitute women.

1.9 Organization of the paper

In an attempt to answer the research questions from Section 1.4, concepts from current development theory, information regarding the situation of food insecurity in rural Bangladesh and the meaning of destitute in that context will be reviewed. Chapter two establishes a framework based upon current theoretical concepts to be used in exploring the VGD policy approach to identifying a target group and the needs of that group. Chapter three contextualizes the needs of the target group destitute women. First, the food insecurity situation in Bangladesh is discussed, followed by evidence from a socio-economic data about the target group as well as qualitative data from testimonies from poor, rural women in Bangladesh. Finally, a discussion of some of the difficulties found to be associated with targeting the destitute is presented. Chapter four compares the WFP policy document of Project Bangladesh 2226.07 – “*Vulnerable group development: support for rural women to move out of extreme poverty*” with the theoretical framework established in chapters two and three. Chapter five draws conclusions based on the comparison between theory and practice, summarizes the main findings in response to the initial research questions, and offers policy recommendations based on the findings.

Theoretical Framework

2.0 Introduction

The UN Decade of Women (1975–1985) produced a wealth of research that repeatedly pointed to the fact that women consistently bear a far greater share of the burden of the development process while their needs and interests are rarely taken into account (Pearson, 1992; Tinker, 1990). The field of gender planning emerged from this increased awareness about the differential effects that development interventions have had in men and women’s lives. Consequently, various approaches to incorporating a gender-perspective into policy formulation and design have emerged.

One intention of a gender planning perspective has been to provide policy makers with tools that can help them design gender-sensitive, as opposed to what Naila Kabeer refers to as ‘gender-blind’, development policies (Kabeer, 1994). In order to gain an understanding of how a gender-targeted program such as the Vulnerable Group Development programme, which states the “...economic, and eventually also social, empowerment...” of destitute women in rural Bangladesh as its primary goal (WFP, 1995b: 2), has designed its programme intervention to incorporate a gender perspective, it is necessary to elaborate on theories from the discourse on access to food versus the availability of food, targeting destitute women, social relations, and the interlinkages of these concepts with that of empowerment. This review of the current theoretical work concerning the issues of planning for development, gender and destitute women in the development discourse, will serve as a frame of reference for an exploration of how the WFP has identified and attempted to fulfilling the VGD’s target group’s needs. These concepts will be used to help clarify how the VGD policy design compares with current theory regarding targeted interventions and the empowerment of women.

Section 2.1 presents the discourse surrounding the issue of access to food or other

resources versus their availability in famine or situations of chronic hunger. In section 2.2, the methodology of targeting and types of targeting failure are discussed. Section 2.3 outlines “Project Bangladesh 2226, Vulnerable group development: support to rural women to move out of extreme poverty” in order to establish its main objectives, activities and expected outputs. Section 2.4 considers an alternative means of conceptualizing a target group’s needs and interests from a social-relations perspective and the relevance of this approach to the VGD programme and its beneficiaries. Section 2.5 establishes a working definition of empowerment based upon the work of scholars from the South as well as a typology of the forms of power that the concept of “empowerment” can be understood to encompass. Section 2.6 concludes the chapter with an overview of how the concepts that have been presented will be applied in a comparison with the WFP’s Vulnerable Group Development policy intervention.

2.1 Access versus availability

Food availability decline (the FAD approach) is often cited as the cause of famines and chronic hunger in the face of stagnant or declining food production combined with population growth. However, Amartya Sen has challenged the FAD approach to explaining famine and widespread chronic hunger with a concept that encompasses one’s access, or entitlements to food and other resources. In the entitlement approach Sen presents evidence towards the fact that recent famines in Bengal (1943), Bangladesh (1974) and Wollo, Ethiopia (1973 & 1984-85) were characterized not by declines in food availability, but rather by the lack of access that marginalized groups in those societies had to securing food (Crow, 1992; Sen, 1994). Lack of access stems, in the entitlement approach, from what Sen has termed people’s loss of entitlements, or command over food or other resources. Entitlements are established either through *direct entitlement* through one’s own labor and production, through “*exchange entitlement* which is achieved through selling one’s labor power in order to buy food”, or through “*trade-entitlement* which is the sale of produce to buy food” (Crow, 1992:24). Lack of ability to exercise, or access, one’s direct, exchange or trade entitlements, over food stems from the collapse of one’s endowments “which are those capacities and owned assets which can be used to establish entitlement over

food” where Crow defines entitlements as “forms of livelihood or social relationships which give command over food” (Crow, 1992: 24).

Another form of entitlement relevant to the well-being and food security of women in rural Bangladesh is elaborated upon by Kabeer in *Monitoring Poverty as if Gender Mattered: a Methodology for Rural Bangladesh*. Family-based entitlements are of great importance to women in rural Bangladesh in that “the welfare of individual members is tied to the prosperity of the unit as a whole” as this unit is the basis of social organization in rural society (Kabeer, 1989:31-32). Within the household however, “access to consumption resources appears to be determined by the individual member’s place in the ‘various forms of hierarchy which coalesce’ within the household (Whitehead, 1981) along the lines of age, gender and kinship status” (Kabeer, 1989: 32). Thus, the gender-differentiated experience of poverty processes results from “women’s lack of access to materially based entitlements and their disproportionate dependence on kinship-ascribed entitlements” in rural Bangladesh (Kabeer, 1989:33). Furthermore, the “increasing presence of women as heads of households is another indicator of their failure to preserve intact those culturally-prescribed entitlements which rest on protection from male kin” (Kabeer, 1989:33). Various sources have pointed to a higher rate of divorce and desertion among poor and landless groups, and the resulting female headed households (i.e. households where “all decisions are taken mainly by a female, because there are no adult male members,” [Kabeer, 1989:33]) are likely to be poor (Miranda, 1982; Chaudhury and Ahmed, 1980; Islam, 1979; Kabeer,1986,1989). It is important to note here that the prevalence of female-headed households among the poor should not be taken to imply homogeneity among these households. The processes by which women become de facto heads of household varies greatly and is significant in determining their resulting access to resources (Kabeer, 1989). Aside from of women’s subordinate position vis-à-vis men, women as individuals are highly diverse in their entitlements, experiences and needs.

In the context of rural Bangladesh, the distinction between entitlement failure and food availability decline is important in considering the issues of food security and empowerment. While although it may be the case that, in some instances, a decline in food availability does take place leading to food insecurity, the situation of food

insecurity experienced by the majority of rural poor, and women in particular, stems to a large extent from their lack of, or deteriorating access to, entitlements. The group identified as destitute women experience a lack of ability to exercise, or access, their direct, exchange or trade entitlements over food that stems from the collapse of their family based entitlements. If, as previously mentioned, endowments are understood to be capacities and owned assets which can be used to establish entitlement over food and we follow Crow's definition of entitlements as "forms of livelihood or social relationships which give command over food", then the collapse of the family base in this context leads also to the collapse of the entitlements that these women previously used to exercise their command over food (Crow, 1992: 24). Above and beyond other processes of poverty in this context, this particular sort of entitlement failure holds gender-specific ramifications for women. Divorced, widowed, separated or deserted women face strong societal stigmatization that impacts the various livelihood strategies available to them once they live on their own without a male earner in the household. This situation is so significant in rural Bengali context that women who have been divorced, deserted, widowed or separated have come to be labeled destitute. This label is used by the Government of Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and other development agencies active in rural development to encompass the vulnerability of widowed, divorced, separated or deserted women (Chen, 1986; Wood, 1994). Use of the label destitute emphasizes the constraints women in these circumstances face in trying to make use of their endowments such as own labor power or what little land they might possess when their family based entitlements breakdown.

Entitlement failure is significant in understanding food security for destitute women because draws attention to issues of access and distribution of consumption, production or trade resources rather than on a decline in available food stocks. If differential access to and inequitable distribution of resources are understood as the main sources of food insecurity, then interventions designed to increase food security and empower a target group must address of the constraints upon target group member's access to resources. Although food aid does serve the important function of providing nutrition to the food insecure and possibly freeing them from subsistence activities in order to attend development training classes, the core problem of lack of access is neither addressed nor remedied in order to ensure future, enduring food

security. Furthermore, it raises the issue of the importance of their social relations with others for maintaining their food security. Women's experience of food insecurity is integrally linked to their social relations within the family and with men in particular. Male mediated access to resources means that women experience a gender-specific disadvantage should the family base collapse. An attempt to increase the food security of destitute women through economic and social empowerment strategies would, thus, need to consider the social relations context of these women's lives as well as the specific needs of the women that arise from that context.

In the next section the methodology of targeting, a means of directing resources directly towards destitute women to fulfill identified or perceived needs through a development programme, will be discussed followed by an overview on the method used by the World Food Programme in the VGD programme in rural Bangladesh.

2.2 The Methodology of Targeting

Targeting is a method used in development programmes to plan, design and implement projects. The purpose of targeting is to direct a project's activities, resources or aid towards a specific group, known as the target population rather than including an entire population (Cornia and Stewart, 1995). Target group members may qualify for inclusion in the project or programme based on certain socio-economic characteristics such as income, the amount of land a household owns, place or type of residence, size of household or number of earners in a household. Other characteristics may also be criteria such as one's gender, whether a woman is pregnant or lactating, the age of one's dependents, or whether a woman is the main wage earner in a household.

Selection of the target group population can be made by an administrative body, which controls for the requisite qualifications and thereby determines who is included in the target or non-target populations. Another means of selection for a target group is self-selection where members of the target group determine their own eligibility for the program. Most often self-targeting programs are designed to provide resources regarded in that particular setting as inferior goods, such as wheat in a culture where rice is a more desirable food, as it is believed that only those truly in need of the

goods or services will thus partake. The hope is that those who are not in need of the goods or services will not partake of them to avoid compromising their dignity through accepting inferior goods. Meanwhile, those truly in need will not be in the position to worry about dignity but will be compelled to self-select.

Two types of errors have been identified with targeting. Firstly E-error, or what can be termed an 'excess' error, results when not only the target population is reached, but members of the non-target population are also included as beneficiaries or recipients of aid (Cornia and Stewart, 1995). The consequence of such an error is that additional costs to a project or program may be incurred as more beneficiaries than initially planned for have been reached. The second type of error, F-error or 'failure' error occurs when members of the target population are omitted from the targeted intervention (Cornia and Stewart, 1995). F-errors may result from difficulties in identifying members of a target group, insufficient funds or supplies to reach target group members, or target group members' inability to participate or lack of knowledge in a project or program. Increasing studies have been drawing attention to the fact that although development practitioners often spend a great deal of effort and attention on minimizing errors of excess in order to reduce leakage of funds or supplies to non-target population member, the consequences of F-error are graver (Cornia and Stewart, 1995). Unlike E-errors where additional costs may be incurred, F-errors can result in increasing severity of malnutrition or death when members of the target population are omitted from food or medical interventions.

In the following section, an overview of the VGD targeted programme in rural Bangladesh, will be presented. The selection methods used by the WFP are detailed as well as the socio-economic characteristics used to determine one's eligibility for inclusion in the VGD programme. Finally, the objectives of the VGD programme are presented along with background information from WFP's Bangladesh Country Programme regarding WFP's focus on destitute women and their food security.

2.3 Project Bangladesh 2226, Vulnerable group development: support to rural women to move out of extreme poverty

Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) is a multi-donor program active throughout Bangladesh for which the World Food Program (WFP) provides roughly 35% of the resources. The VGD is WFP's largest project for women in the world which exclusively targets women "whose lives are dominated by extreme poverty, illiteracy, disease and malnutrition" (WFP, 1995b).

VGD has its origins in a relief program called Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), which was begun in 1975 in response to the flooding and famine of 1974 combined with the aftermath of the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971-73. In the 1980s, the VGF became Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) once awareness was reached that a more comprehensive and sustained form of development assistance than what a relief program was intended to provide, was needed.

The target group members that Project Bangladesh 2226 aims to include in the distribution of a monthly food ration of 30 kilograms of wheat are selected by the following criteria:

1. functionally landless (ownership of less than 0.5 acres of land);
2. household income of under 300 thaka (approx. US\$ 7.50) per month;
3. household relies on daily or casual labor; and
4. preference is given to female heads of households, women who are divorced/deserted/separated from their husbands, or whose husbands are disabled (Khan, 1999:1).

The services, in addition to income transfer through food aid, that the VGD provides through Project Bangladesh 2226 to about 70 per cent of the women defined as destitute, are part of a "development package" which consists of "group formation for social awareness building, training in income-earning and human development skills, and provision of credit". The development package is delivered mainly by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (WFP, 1995b).

The stated primary goal of the project is the "...economic, and eventually also social, empowerment"...

"of the poorest and most disadvantaged women in rural Bangladesh so that they may sufficiently graduate beyond their existing conditions of food and economic insecurity and low social status, and be able to sustain themselves above the hard-core poverty level" (WFP, 1995b: 6).

The means to attaining the end of economic and social empowerment are to be realized through four sub-projects which include the following: Income Generation (IG) sub-project No. 1; Women's training centre (WTC), sub-project No.2; Group leaders and extension workings (GLEW), sub-project No.3; and Institutional feeding (IF), sub-project No.4. It is the Income Generation (IG) project, with an income transfer through food aid component, which this study will confine itself to for the purposes of analysis. The IG sub-project is the largest of the four sub-projects and as such reaches more women (approximately 443,000 across several districts) than any of the others.

The first immediate objective of the IG sub-project is "to facilitate training in marketable skills, encourage the accumulation of seed capital through savings and provide access to credit in order to: i) build women's income-earning capacity and ii) enable them to "graduate" into ongoing development programmes" (WFP, 1995b).

The second immediate objective of the IG sub-project is "to enhance social awareness through active participation of poor women in groups for functional education and other human development skills training" (WFP, 1995b).

The expected outputs of income generation (IG), sub-project No.1 are the provision of the "full development package of income-generation training, credit and social and empowering services, mainly through the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), for at least 330,000 of the women in the two-year cycle, and graduation into the core programme of the collaborating organizations" (WFP, 1995b). The core programme referred to is the Rural Development Programme of the BRAC, which has been active in development activities at the grassroots level in rural Bangladesh since 1972.

In the 1997 – 2000 Bangladesh Country Program the WFP states that its highest priorities are to address the food insecurity of the poorest segment of the rural population, which is caused by lack of employment opportunities. The WFP finds that the effects of extreme poverty fall “most severely on women and children” (WFP, 1996). Therefore, the strategic focus of the project is to help poor women in the rural regions to move out of extreme poverty through motivation, training and access to credit (WFP, 1996).

The Country Program goes on to further state that: “(a) households headed by women are among the poorest; (b) experience has shown that women are more highly motivated to learn in groups; (c) women direct newly found knowledge and income to benefiting their entire household; and (d) they actually repay their loans” (WFP, 1996). Thus, this is the rationalization for targeting women through the VGD project.

The role of the food aid, 30 kilograms of wheat per month for the 18 months while a woman is engaged in the project activities, acts as a transfer of income to the women. Not only is it proposed that the food aid will help ensure food security among the women targeted by Project Bangladesh 2226, but also that provision of food will “enable women to have more time to gain access to other services” (WFP, 1996).

In order to be able to further explore the VGD intervention’s approach to targeting destitute women and their needs it is necessary to more consider in detail some key concepts that arise from the above description of the policy document “Project Bangladesh 2226” and its related activities. Before addressing the research questions from section 1.4, the concepts of social relations and empowerment must first be clarified, providing a working understanding of their relevance to the fulfillment of a target group’s, destitute women in this instance, needs.

2.4 Social Relations and Food Security

Gender planning for development is premised upon the recognition of men and women’s different social roles. The social-relations framework that Naila Kabeer has developed is useful as a tool in planning gender-sensitive interventions as it highlights how social relations, and gender-relations in specific, determine to a great extent the

needs and interests of different actors involved in the development process. The different and possibly conflicting interests and needs of women and men, or different social classes, castes or age groups, can effect the eventual outcomes of an intervention.

Institutions, development organizations in this instance, are based on a set of rules, resources and practices (Kabeer, 1996). These norms determine how a problem is conceptualized and approached through a program intervention, which maps out the institutional response to an identified problem. Policy goals such as the economic and social empowerment of women theoretically set out to address issues inter-linked with relations of gender-subordination in a particular setting. As the social-relations framework helps to unpack complex relations of gender-subordination, it will be considered here for its relevance to the VGD policy goal of the empowerment of destitute women.

In an effort to increase an awareness about differing gender-based needs and interests into development planning practice, Kabeer elaborated upon Molyneux's concept of practical and strategic gender concerns (Kabeer, 1994). In this approach, gender is not seen as an isolated aspect of people's lives or identities. Rather, it is acknowledged as being inter-related with people's class, caste and other social relations. In as much as men and women's roles in society are defined by cultural norms, practices and expectations about their behavior, needs stemming from such a system in different contexts "define both how men and women perceive their day-to-day practical needs as well as giving them differing and possibly conflicting stakes" in meeting their basic welfare needs (Kabeer, 1994: 90). Above and beyond the basic human need for subsistence, *practical gender-specific needs* are defined by Kabeer as those needs which reflect people's "socially ascribed obligations and responsibilities" (Kabeer, 1996: 22). Given the sexual division of labor within households which commonly identifies women in their reproductive, productive and caretaker capacities, practical gender needs can thus be defined as those needs which pertain to providing basic welfare needs for the household. In contrast, *strategic gender interests* derive from the "...interests identified for an alternative, more equal and satisfactory organization of society" which have the capacity to transform "both the structure and nature of relationships between men and women" (Moser, 1989: 1802).

Strategic gender interests (as well as practical gender-specific needs) vary across social, cultural and political cultures. Unlike strategic gender interests, practical gender-specific needs do not “generally entail a strategic goal such as women’s emancipation or gender equality...nor do they challenge the prevailing forms of subordination even though they arise directly out of them” (Molyneux, 1985: 233).

The distinction Kabeer makes between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests highlights the fact that women and men “are embedded in specific divisions of resources and responsibilities,” and therefore that their practical needs are likely to “reflect their institutionally ascribed obligations” (Kabeer, 1994: 90). However, the distinction between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests diminishes, and the linkage between the two becomes more clear, when the fulfillment of practical needs is done in such a manner as to transform or challenge the existing order of social relations.

Empowerment enters the discussion at this point as “it is when interventions seek to challenge the rules, resources and practices through which gender inequalities are institutionally constituted, that they touch on strategic gender interests” (Kabeer, 1996: 22). Challenging gender-inequality norms, previously unquestioned, not only enables the process of empowerment but is also a first step for marginalized women in their process of self-empowerment.

In light of the above discussion it can be concluded that

“...gender-aware policy approach must take account of the gender relations of the relevant institutional context within which specific activities are currently undertaken...”

in the process of analyzing which aspects of these relations need to be challenged or reproduced (Kabeer, 1994b: 91). Once such a contextual analysis has been carried out, the possibilities for designing more gender-sensitive policy responses can be determined. The capacity of poor and marginalized women to challenge the status quo of unequal gender-relations can be built up through a process of empowerment which can be inspired or supported by “...meeting daily practical needs in ways that transform the conditions in which women make choices...” as this is “...a crucial element of the process by which women are empowered to take on the more deeply

entrenched aspects of their subordination” (Kabeer, 1994b: 310). Meeting daily practical needs in transformative ways can include ensuring access for women to resources previously regarded in that context as the domain of men such as cash income, credit, or land rights. However, not only is the access to resources important but how they are provided and for what purpose also impact upon their transformative and empowering potential.

In the next section, the concept of empowerment is considered as it relates to challenging existing gender-relations of subordination between men and women. A working definition of empowerment as developed by feminist scholars from the South is detailed followed by a discussion on the contrast between the “position” and the “condition” of women’s lives. The section ends with an overview of the different dimensions and domains of power that Mayoux developed to highlight various forms that power can take in gender-aware development initiatives.

2.5 Conceptualizing Empowerment

The concept of women’s empowerment emerged out of grassroots activism in the 1970s and despite the wide usage it now receives in development planning, it remains simultaneously a highly controversial and unclear term. In 1985 Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), an inter-regional organization of the South that advocates for alternative development processes with a particular emphasis on attention paid to the needs of Third World women and their children, defined empowerment as a

“... transformation of existing social relations from the vantage point of the most oppressed sections of our societies: women who are disenfranchised by class, race, and nationality”(Kabeer, 1994: 84).

This transformation has more recently been supplemented by Batliwala, a scholar from South Asia, as entailing “...radical changes in law, property rights, and other institutions that reinforce and perpetuate male domination” (Batliwala, 1994:128). Drawing upon Young’s work (1988), Batliwala discusses the “condition” of women’s lives as it contrasts with the “position” of women. Condition here pertains to the

material state in which women live, while position refers to the social and economic status of women vis-à-vis men (Batliwala, 1994:128). These concepts correspond closely with Kabeer's practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. A change in the condition, or practical state, of women's lives through higher wages, better nutrition, access to health care, fuel, education and training fulfills immediate practical needs, but does not automatically bring about a change in women's position, or strategic interests. If empowerment is the ultimate goal, then the fulfillment of a practical need does not achieve this end on its own. The approach taken in addressing women's condition, or practical needs, affects the possibility or nature of changes in women's position or strategic interests (Batliwala, 1994: 129). In her understanding of the term empowerment, it is "[t]he process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may be termed empowerment" (Batliwala, 1994:130). Batliwala concludes that "...empowerment strategies must intervene at the level of women's condition while also transforming their position, thus simultaneously addressing both practical and strategic needs" (Batliwala, 1994:135). In other words, ensuring access to resources within the existing gender relations of power has less of an empowering capacity than an intervention which seeks to redistribute resources in a manner which ultimately transforms inequitable relations of subordination in a society, redistributing the resource of power as well.

The strategic component of empowerment in this discussion is thus power. If power is considered to be the control over "material assets, intellectual resources and ideology" then power belongs to "those who control or are able to influence the distribution of material resources, knowledge, and the ideology that governs social relations in both public and private life" (Batliwala, 1994:129). Linda Mayoux has highlighted the necessity of establishing what form of power is being referred to in gender-aware development initiatives. Power can be assessed in terms of the dimensions of power (i.e. economic empowerment, contribution to wellbeing and social, political and legal empowerment), the different domains of empowerment (i.e. the individual, household, community, market, national level) and an understanding of the type of power relations distinguished as: "power within, power to, power over and power with" (Mayoux, 1998:8). "Power within" can be thought of as heightened awareness of one's condition and position, or conscientisation (Mayoux, 1998:8).

“Power to” refers to access to resources that can fulfill practical gender needs, while “power over” relates to one’s strategic gender interests that impart transformative changes over one’s position. Finally, “power with” is identified by Mayoux as encompassing participation and “also collective mobilization to address” strategic gender interests (Mayoux, 1998:8).

The differentiation between different types of relations that one has with power as applied by Mayoux can illuminate the needs that must be fulfilled in order for one to become empowered. If the target group of destitute women is defined in the VGD program as needing to be economically and socially empowered then a clear understanding of the dimensions of power, the different domains of empowerment and relations to power that the women experience can help highlight the sources of the target group’s dis-empowerment. Identification of the sources of dis-empowerment should be the basis for designing a program that seeks to fulfill the identified need for empowerment. From that point onwards,

2.6 Conclusion

The concepts presented in Chapter two form the basis for addressing this study’s research questions later in this paper. Firstly, the distinction between access to a resource and availability of a resource was clarified for its usefulness in gaining an understanding about the processes of poverty and food insecurity. If food insecurity is considered as stemming from one’s loss of entitlements, then an effective intervention to improve food security of a group would need to address the causes of entitlement failure. In the case at hand, we saw that entitlement failure of destitute women in rural Bangladesh, arises through the dissolution of male mediated access to resources. Should such family-based entitlements end or be disrupted, often times the resulting female-headed households are rendered particularly vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. From this point, an overview on the methodology of targeting was presented followed by a description of WFP’s VGD targeted intervention programme for destitute women with particular reference to who is targeted and how. Kabeer’s theory on social relations was then presented for its applicability in the discussion on targeting women and defining their needs. As gender is present in all social situations, understanding the gendered needs of the target group may illustrate whether a programme’s strategy to empower them is addressing the needs in a

potentially empowering manner. Finally, a working definition of the concept of empowerment was presented along with the components it is comprised of according to Mayoux's work on the subject. The element of power in empowerment needs to be disassembled in order to gain clarity about how it features as a goal of a development intervention. For this purpose, Mayoux's distinction between forms of power, namely, power within, power to, power over and power with, will facilitate an examination of how empowerment features in the WFP approach to food security for destitute women in rural Bangladesh.

- III -
**Defining Target Groups
And Their Needs**

3.0 Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the prevalence and geographical distribution of food insecurity in Bangladesh. These elements of the food insecurity situation in Bangladesh are relevant to this study as the Vulnerable Group Programme bases its food aid allocations on relative food insecurity of the subdistricts in Bangladesh. Section 3.2 discusses the connection between gender and food insecurity in rural Bangladesh with particular emphasis on qualitative evidence regarding rural women's entitlements and the processes of entitlement failure which influence destitute women's needs or interests. Section 3.3 then details WFP's approach to destitute women describing how their needs are defined and addressed through the program intervention. Section 3.4 examines some of the difficulties associated with targeting destitute women. Section 3.5 concludes on the resulting image of the target group's needs and interests that has emerged from the preceding discussion of food insecurity in rural Bangladesh and the experience of women who have been defined as destitute.

3.1 Prevalence and Geographical Distribution of Food Insecurity in Bangladesh

The prevalence of food insecurity in rural Bangladesh is high, with only five percent of the population consuming "an adequate quantity and quality of food, while the 58 per cent of the rural population suffer from long-term malnutrition" (Kabeer, 1997:142). Seventy-five percent of Bangladesh's population of 125 million people live in rural villages (Hossain et al, 1999). Up to, at least, 65% of the rural poor are functionally landless, owning less than 0.5 acres of agricultural land (WFP,1996). In her work *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Bina Agarwal refers to land as "the most critical form of property in agrarian economies" (Agarwal, 1994:3). Studies of rural poverty in Bangladesh have pointed to the fact

that the main sources of income for the functionally landless are daily wage labor activities in agriculture and some occasional off-farm work (Hossain et al, 1999). Whether the prevalence of hunger is measured by calculating the percentage of people with a calorie-deficient diet, or whether it is calculated by household expenditure, survey data from the Food and Agricultural Organization indicates that “rural wage labourers, both in farm and non-farm sectors, are the most severely deprived among all socio-economic groups” (Osmani, 1995:336).

The World Food Programme has undertaken a ‘distress’ mapping exercise which maps out the geographical distribution of relative food insecurity in Bangladesh (WFP, 1997). The indicators chosen to gauge the relative food insecurity of each subdistrict of Bangladesh include:

1. Incidence of natural disasters (flood, cyclone, drought, erosion);
2. Foodgrain deficit/surplus;
3. Agricultural wage rate;
4. Proportion of households not owning agricultural land;
5. Proportion of unemployed persons;
6. Proportion of widowed, divorced, and separated women; and
7. Proportion of literate women

(WFP, 1997)

The resulting “Resource Allocation Map” reflects the relative concentration of food insecurity in the rural areas of Bangladesh while also highlighting the concentration of poor women in those areas (WFP, 1997). The map is used in allocating food aid to the most food insecure areas. As poor women and their children have been identified by the WFP as the most vulnerable sections of society to food insecurity, the relative concentration of this group as it corresponds with geographically vulnerable areas (those areas highly susceptible to flooding and erosion or drought) helps the WFP to target their intervention efforts more precisely for what WFP regards as optimal use of food aid resources (WFP, 1997). The poorest areas most vulnerable to food insecurity can thus be seen to be located along the rivers and coast lines where flooding erosion and cyclones have the most damaging effects. In addition to the cyclones and floods however, areas that tend to feel the effects of droughts, which Bangladesh also

experiences, also feature among the most food insecure geographical areas on the Resource Allocation Map. In this manner, the WFP has developed a guideline map of which areas are most vulnerable and thus, where their targeting efforts are concentrated through the VGD programme.

The following section explores the relationship between gender and poverty in rural Bangladesh in further detail. Women's subordination in that context is discussed and the relative importance of a woman's marital status to her and her household's food security is considered. The section's emphasis is upon evidence from qualitative sources, regarding destitute women's needs and interests that stem from the marginalized status they experience in rural Bangladesh.

3.2 Food Insecurity and "Destitute" Women

Evidence points to women and female headed households as being disproportionately represented among the 'poorest of the poor' throughout the world (UNDP, 1995; Buvinic and Gupta, 1997). However, many academics and development practitioners caution against the assumption of homogeneity among the poor or destitute through simply collapsing various dimensions of subordination or disenfranchisement into the category of 'poor' (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1996; Kynch, 1998; White, 1992). Such assumptions have the effect of reducing efforts to address the varying sources of inequitable relations of subordination and marginalization, that stem from issues related to class, caste, age or ethnicity that cause or aggravate poverty processes. Kabeer's notions of social relations and the intangible aspects of well being, such as autonomy and security, prove useful in understanding the situation of poor women in rural Bangladesh. It is both the material and immaterial circumstances of a woman's experience of poverty in rural Bangladesh that bear impact upon her well being.

In rural Bangladesh, "women caught in the poverty trap face conflicting choices between survival needs and social status within the community" (Agarwal, 1994: 461). Women's experience of security or poverty in rural Bangladesh is complex and interrelated with culture-specific gender roles, responsibilities and expectations and good social relations with male relatives as well as members of the community outside the home are important in buttressing against a decline into poverty (White,

1992: 112). A woman's risk of poverty, food insecurity, or security, is mediated through her husband or other male family members in rural Bangladesh (Agarwal, 1994; Chen, 1986; Kabeer, 1989; White, 1992; Wignaraja, 1990; Wood, 1994) which can, and does, result in women being poor "through the character and deterioration of the intra-household social relations upon which they depend" (Jackson, 1998:55). As discussed in section 2.1, this erosion of family-based entitlements, in a context where women are seen as dependent upon men for their access to resources and subsistence, results in an extremely vulnerable position for women. In particular, poor women who have been divorced or deserted are not only left financially unsupported, but are often also blamed by others in the community for ending up in such a socially stigmatized position. Poor women that must provide for themselves and their families through laboring for income outside their homes are further socially stigmatized for breaking purdah norms and are viewed as having brought such disgrace upon themselves by failing to keep their marriages intact. Finally, there are often limited possibilities for women, especially poor women, to take legal recourse in order to claim their entitlements to land or other property that they are legally entitled to claim should intra-household relations dissolve through divorce, death or desertion. Efforts to take legal action are commonly resisted through threatening scare tactics, and in some cases with violence, by those that risk the chance of losing out should a woman's entitlements be legally validated.

A woman's class and marital status confer a specific position and identity in rural Bangladesh. The experience of being poor and husband-less bears great influence on the vulnerability of a woman's position in her community life in rural Bangladesh (Chen, 1986; Wood, 1994). Poor women who have been deserted, divorced or widowed are not only dispossessed of their family-based entitlements to property and food, but their single status also often brings with it social exclusion, stigmatization and marginalization in the village or community. Furthermore, should a deserted, divorced or widowed rural woman be compelled to break the purdah norms of female seclusion and find work outside her household or *bari* (living compound) in order to earn money to sustain her family and herself, her social status within the community tends to be negatively impacted upon, resulting in yet further social exclusion and stigmatization. Exclusion and stigmatization of a woman, and consequently her household, can increase that household's economic decline and vulnerability to

poverty and food insecurity (Chen, 1986; Hossain et al., 1999; Kabeer, 1989; Kynch, 1998; White, 1992; Wood, 1994).

Qualitative evidence about destitute women from various studies in rural Bangladesh reveals the many different sources of their subordination and vulnerability and consequently their needs relating to empowerment. Martha Chen's work *A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh* highlights the class and gender related forces which interrelate in the process of poverty that poor women experience in two different rural regions of Bangladesh. Although the poor women participating in the two pilot projects run by the BRAC identified inequitable gender relations within the household as one constraint upon their lives, in their analysis of the main problems they faced, oppressive class relations were highlighted by the women as a major source of their poverty and vulnerability. Poor women, driven by the need for income to purchase food or repay loans with extortionate rates of interest from wealthier community members, were compelled to find paid work outside the home, often in the homes of those wealthier lending families within their villages and for low wages and irregular and unreliable working hours. In addition to controlling the paid labor opportunities in the village, the richer classes also appeared to dictate, through influential relations of patronage with village religious leaders, the norms of *purdah* (conformity to female seclusion norms) or *bepurdah* (non-*purdah*; outside the *purdah* norms) that prohibited women, especially poorer women, from seeking work outside the village (Chen, 1986: 72-73). While daughters of wealthier classes were permitted to leave the village to attend school or university and to hold jobs as teachers or extension workers, poor women who left their households, let alone villages, to seek work on the markets, in the agricultural fields or in building roads were criticized and socially rejected within their community (Chen, 1986; White, 1992). A picture of needs that emerges from this study include access to employment opportunities that are not exploitative either in wages or work loads, access to credit with non-extortionate rates of interest and in the view of the women themselves, a transformation in the social relations between the classes in their villages which would impact upon the previous two identified needs.

The women in Chen's study were generally found to have some assets or entitlements in common that including a legal entitlement to half the amount of property or goods

that a woman's brother inherits from their father's estate, the legal entitlement to be economically supported by a husband and finally the right to a *mahr*, an agreed upon sum of money or property (or dower in English) that the groom promises to the bride in case of divorce (Chen, 1986: 55-56). In reality these entitlements are rarely claimed and a marriage is often considered to be tentative until the birth of a first child (Chen, 1986: 56). Beyond these legal rights, a woman's assets such as land or livestock were often observed to be eventually subsumed under the assets of the household in general, or men in particular if relatively valuable assets or amounts of money were involved. Emerging from these findings are needs related increased awareness among women about their legal rights and entitlements as well as a need for more accessible legal modes of challenging gender and class inequitable or illegal control over resources such as inheritance or property.

In her study on gender and class in the village of Kumirpur, entitled *Arguing with the Crocodile: Gender and Class in Bangladesh*, Sarah White also considered the assets that destitute women could rely upon for their security. Interestingly, one of the first assets cited was "good social relations", which were emphasized as of greatest importance to female heads of households (i.e. destitute women in WFP policy terms) as they serve as backstoppers in times of crisis or hardship (White, 1992). The ability to call upon kin, neighbors or other social contacts proved to be among the most important survival strategies among the poor women in her study. White further considered some constraints upon women's livelihood strategies that increased their vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity. These included women's lack of access to land and opportunities for income generation "...combined with their high risk of being subjected to sexual harassment and social criticism..." and which tended to make them "...acutely vulnerable to the dissolution of relationships with men on whom they rely" (White, 1992: 113). In other words, one of the key resources that women rely upon is their family membership. White's assessment of the situation of poor women in her study was that the social relations were important links that destitute women depended upon for their well being in the absence of other more "personal" assets such as land, jewelry, livestock or income. If good social relations are considered as one of the intangible assets upon which poor or destitute women can fall back upon in times of crisis, then the interrelated practical and strategic needs stemming from the lack of such relations would include social and economic

networks with other community members which were based upon equitable and mutually supportive principles as opposed to oppressive relations of social exploitation.

The following section 3.3 presents an overview how the World Food Programme has conceptualized destitute women and identified their needs through the VGD programme in rural Bangladesh. In addition to the official criteria used to categorize individual women as destitute based upon socio-economic characteristics, less direct, but equally important, images of how destitute women are featured in the VGD programme are also considered. Such images are important for the insight they offer into how the target group members and their needs are conceptualized and thus approached by the WFP through the VGD programme.

3.3 WFP Definition of Destitute Women

Destitute women feature as the main target group in the Vulnerable Group Development Program. The WFP has defined according to certain criteria who is to be counted as destitute. Earlier the criteria were mentioned as:

1. functionally landless (own less than 0.5 acres of agricultural land)
2. extremely low household income per month (technically defined as below 300 thaka per month = US\$7.50 per month)
3. from households which rely on daily or casual labor
4. and preference is given to female heads of household (women who are divorced/deserted/separated from their husbands, or whose husbands are disabled)

In addition to being confined to such criteria, the target group is also included in the formulation and design of the VGD programme in more conceptual terms. This conceptualization of the target group influences how the needs of the group are identified and addressed through the development programme. An overview of the WFP's conceptualization of the target group destitute women, as it has been laid out in Project Bangladesh 2226, "Vulnerable Group Development: Support to rural women to move out of extreme poverty", is detailed below.

Beyond the technical criteria used to categorize individuals as eligible or ineligible for inclusion in the VGD, destitute women also feature in the Project Bangladesh 2226 policy document in more conceptual terms. Destitute women also refers to the poorest and most disadvantaged women in Bangladesh whose lives are “dominated by extreme poverty, illiteracy, disease and malnutrition” (WFP, 1995b). The usual indicators of women’s wellbeing are referred to such as illiteracy, caloric intake and the life expectancy of women as compared to that of men. The social subordination of women is referred to briefly as “unequal treatment” regarding access to food within the household from birth onwards which results in females learning to be “self-sacrificing” (WFP, 1995b). Women’s lack of control over decision making is mentioned and is attributed to legal constraints (such as laws regarding inheritance) as well as deeply embedded “culture and practice” in Bangladesh. Finally, the limited access to employment that women, and especially poor women, have is highlighted as it relates to the “hard-core poor who experience chronic food shortages due to their inability to participate in the market” (WFP, 1995b). In this conceptualization, destitute women and their families are identified as the most vulnerable and thus in greatest need of assistance through the VGD program.

The VGD program further explains the importance of targeting destitute women in a variety of ways throughout the VGD policy document that illuminate how the program approaches the target group and the fulfillment of their needs. Through the VGD program WFP states that it is bringing women fully into the mainstream of development in accordance with WFP’s mission statement (WFP, 1995b). It is also stated that through the development process the program aims to bring “destitute women to a minimum threshold level for their involvement in self-help economic activities”(WFP, 1995b). Furthermore, the improvement of

“...the socio-economic conditions of the poorest and most disadvantaged women in rural Bangladesh so that they may sufficiently graduate beyond their existing conditions of food and economic insecurity and low social status, and be able to sustain themselves above the hard-core poverty level...”

is stated as the long-term objective of the program (WFP, 1995b: 6). Finally, the long-term objectives are to be achieved through the immediate objectives in the subprojects. The income generation project’s objectives include “training in

marketable skills, encourage the accumulation of seed capital through savings” and provision of access to credit to enhance women’s income-earning capacity and “enable them to “graduate” into ongoing development programmes” as well as to “enhance social awareness through active participation of poor women in groups for functional education and other human development skills training” (WFP, 1995b).

3.4 Difficulties Associated with Targeting the Destitute

Recent research on targeting destitute women, also subsumed under the term “hard core poor”, in rural Bangladesh has indicated that problems regarding target group member selection run quite high in large programs which emphasize credit schemes, food aid and development services (Hashemi, 1997: 253). In his work on targeted poverty alleviation schemes in rural Bangladesh, entitled *Those Left Behind: A Note on Targeting the Hardcore Poor* (1997), Hashemi notes that, despite an increase over the past seven years in NGO micro-credit activity in rural Bangladesh, “poverty seems to have declined very marginally” (Hashemi, 1997:252). He attributes this phenomenon to the declining conditions of what he calls the “hard core poor” who fall outside the safety nets of targeted programs in contrast to the improvements in economic conditions of those who have participated in targeted programs.

Reasons why the “hard core poor” might fall outside the targeted program safety net included “self-selection” of these people out of program membership as they did not consider themselves credit-worthy due to the extent of their ‘destituteness’ (Hashemi, 1997). In many cases women who opted not to be members of these schemes were also reported as fearing that they would be unable to pay back loans and would be stuck with debt. A percentage of those women who did wish to join but who opted not to, expressed concern about not be able to learn the rules and lessons required in the social awareness raising components of the development packages (Hashemi, 1997). Finally, Hashemi notes that “a little over a quarter of the women did not join because of social and religious sanctions” regarding social norms, while 13% of the women who wanted to join were rejected as high risks for a number of reasons (1997:253). This analysis of how those identified as destitute come to fall outside a targeted program concluded that the inability of the development program to target destitute women was not as much of an issue as the possibility that the scheme as it

was designed was “not necessarily the way out for all the poor” (Hashemi, 1997: 253).

In order to reach the VGD target group, the WFP has also employed the targeting method. The selection process begins with the national VGD committee which decides the number of cards that can be given to individual *thanas* (clusters of villages organized into units for administrative purposes) on the basis of their relative degree of distress (WFP, 1995b). Following this procedure, women are then selected at the union level by local committees comprised of Union leaders, local schools, colleges, and thana level officials on the basis of the criteria discussed earlier (i.e. landlessness, lack of productive assets and low income) (Khan, 1999). In one sub-project of the VGD programme conducted in three districts it was found that in fact friends and relatives were able to influence the selection committee despite this being a departure from normal procedure (Khan, 1999). Priority is given to female headed households in the VGD programme and the list of beneficiaries must finally be approved by the implementing authorities at the thana level before VGD cards are issued to individual women (WFP, 1995b). The World Food Programme has self-evaluated this selection procedure as “reliable and fair” although “...more rigorous adherence to the stated criteria” was called for in order to avoid favoritism or corruption which could lead to excess targeting error where ineligible program participants are selected to receive a VGD card and thereby participate in the Income Generation sub-project of the VGD programme.

3.5 Conclusion

The prevalence of food insecurity has been presented in order to gain an idea of the magnitude of the problem that much of the rural population faces in Bangladesh. In the second section of this chapter the differential experience women have of food insecurity was described as it stems significantly from the culture-specific position of women and their entitlements within that context rather than a simple lack of availability of food. Qualitative evidence from studies on gender, class and poverty in rural Bangladesh was used to gain insight about women’s entitlements and constraints they face in claiming them was also considered. With this contextual background established, the WFP definition of destitute women was provided in order to examine

the underlying philosophy of that institution regarding the target group of the VGD program. Finally, the difficulties associated with successfully targeting destitute women, as found in a recent study of targeted interventions in rural Bangladesh, were discussed in order to highlight the how the needs identified by program designers may differ from those perceived by members of a target group themselves.

The World Food Program Policy Approach and Current Theory: How Do They Compare?

4.0 Introduction

The Vulnerable Group Development Program has the defined long-term objective of the economic and social empowerment of selected women in rural Bangladesh that have been identified as destitute. Thus far, current theory regarding the issues of food security, targeting poor women and women's empowerment has been presented followed by an overview on how the VGD attempts to address these issues through its Income Generation program. This chapter compares the theory and evidence about the needs of women with the approach taken by the WFP through the VGD policy intervention. Section 4.1 compares the theoretical and the actual VGD processes of needs identification. Section 4.2 examines to what extent the social relations perspective has been incorporated into the VGD programme in its approach to addressing the needs and interests of poor women. Section 4.3 then goes further to compare and contrast the theory of empowerment with the VGD conceptualization of empowerment presented earlier. Section 4.4 will examine what the resulting policy intervention thus addresses in terms of the needs of the target group and the similarities or differences between the approach of the intervention and the needs and interests of the target group as evidenced by literature and data on this group. Section 4.5 will conclude the chapter.

4.1 Needs Identification

Identifying needs is not a "neutral process". Kabeer observes in her work, *Targeting Women or Transforming Institutions*, that "which needs are recognized, whose priorities are adopted, and consequently whose participation can be relied upon further 'downstream' in the policy process are all critically dependent on how planners go about the business of needs identification" (Kabeer, 1995:110). Furthermore, the preconceptions of those responsible for the design of programs have

often led them to impose their own definitions of what women need. The WFP has identified the needs of the target group in their formulation and design of the VGD programme. Following is an examination of how those needs were identified and how the WFP process compares with theory regarding targeting.

The actual process of needs identification used in designing the VGD programme is not detailed by the WFP in either the VGD project document or the Country Programme. However, whether the WFP based the VGD design on existing interventions guided by the BRAC or the Grameen Bank, or whether the WFP conducted an independent problem identification and project design process, one aspect lacking in the planning process, commented upon even by the WFP regarding its own VGD programme intervention, was that participation by the target group members in identifying their own needs was not a part of the process of project design (WFP, 1995b). Through the Income Generation sub-project of the VGD program, the WFP has however, identified what it sees as the needs of destitute women in rural Bangladesh. These needs include food, employment- and income-generating opportunities, credit, group formation and functional education to help to bring destitute women “to a minimum threshold level for their involvement in self-help economic activities” (WFP, 1995b). Through these services and activities, the WFP hopes to promote the “personal development” of women in the target group as well as enable them to earn a better living, thus empowering them economically and eventually socially.

A participatory approach to program formulation and design that aims to include the interests expressed by various interest groups, and most significantly those of women from the target group, is most likely to result in an informed program which is more responsive to the target group’s needs. Section 4.2 examines to what extent the VGD programme takes the social relations perspective into account in the policy approach to destitute women’s economic and social empowerment.

4.2 Social Relations and the VGD

The Income Generation sub-project of the VGD program seeks to fulfill the need for food security through training destitute women in marketable skills, a savings scheme and the provision of micro-credit services “with a special focus on helping poor women” which will help them to build their income-earning capacity and “enable them to ‘graduate’ into ongoing development programs” (WFP, 1995b). From the earlier discussion on the prevalence of food insecurity and its relevance to destitute women’s lives in rural Bangladesh it is clear there is a strong need for improved food security in rural Bangladesh. However, if we consider Kabeer’s social relations perspective, individual’s needs and interests in achieving food security are understood to be located in the broader context of their social interactions. Thus the needs of destitute women for food security and empowerment must be considered in a holistic sense which acknowledges the many different factors which constrain their claims upon entitlements thereby increasing their vulnerability. In as much as destitute women’s needs are influenced by their class, gender and other social relations with those around them, the VGD program must, in theory, consider the needs of the target group of destitute women from the perspective of the social relations framework in which they are located.

As detailed in sections 2.3 and 4.1, the VGD program offers training in marketable skills, savings and micro-credit as they have been identified in the programme design to fulfill destitute women’s defined need for employment and income to use in order to purchase food or other subsistence items for their households. In light of Kabeer’s social relations framework, these services reflect women’s socially ascribed reproductive, productive and caretaker roles. This is not to diminish the importance of income as poor women’s other entitlement claims over land or family based entitlements fail to ensure their access to resources and markets. However, it is argued here that through the VGD programme intervention, the provisioning of such services takes place within the existing relations of power in rural Bangladesh. In the analysis of the VGD program, the program activities will enable the beneficiaries to “graduate beyond their existing conditions of food and economic insecurity and low social status” (WFP, 1995b). Oppressive aspects of rural village society, such as ingrained intra-household and community hierarchies based upon class, gender and age in Bangladesh which contribute to and perpetuate poor women’s subordination,

are not given consideration for their roles in these women's food insecurity. In this formulation of addressing destitute women's needs, the VGD places the sole responsibility for their food security and improving their "low social status" with the women themselves and their ability to "graduate" beyond the level of poverty in which they live. Although empowerment is a process that emanates from within the marginalized themselves, structures or institutions of oppression based on gender, age or class hierarchies such as those evidenced in both Chen's and White's studies, can serve to obstruct this process unless strategic changes in the way they operate or include the marginalized take place.

If the concept of strategic gender interests is applied to the need defined as empowerment, a different picture may appear than what WFP has designed based on their assessment of the target group's needs for achieving their economic and social empowerment. In the WFP approach, the relations of power between different classes and genders, which perpetuate women's subordination in rural Bangladesh, remain unchallenged despite target group women's increased ability to access resources through their participation in the economic sphere outside their homes. If women are destitute in a society where social relations determine that women's position vis-à-vis men or members of a higher class is one of subordination, and that women's access to resources of consumption and production is mediated through their male kin, then the means to destitute women's empowerment may not be food aid or income, savings and credit services alone. Rather, some means of challenging the structures of subordination that impact their security and well being is called for in order to achieve a transformation in the oppressive social relations.

A focus on the 'condition' of the lives of the target group does not automatically include a full picture of the 'position' of destitute women which, as has already been discussed, does have significant impact on their access to and control over entitlements or the relative food insecurity they experience. If we follow the social relations approach to identifying the needs of destitute women in order to enable them to achieve their long-term empowerment, then addressing only the practical gender needs related to the condition of their lives is not sufficient to achieve the goal of empowerment. In order to achieve the long-term economic and social empowerment of these women, a transformation in the structures that enforce and reinforce their

subordination is needed in addition to fulfillment of the more immediate practical gender needs. Fulfilling women's practical gender needs in ways that also satisfy their strategic gender interest of empowerment is also likely to have greater empowering potential in the long run. This could further possibly include efforts to legally strengthen either the marriage bond or the legal rights of women to their share of male income in the event of the erosion of the family unit through advocacy by the WFP at the national level. Otherwise, underlying inequalities stemming from and reinforced by social relations, which perpetuate a situation of vulnerability for poor women, will continue to dominate how resources and access to them are distributed in the context of rural Bangladesh.

The following section considers empowerment in its varying forms. The WFP's approach is deconstructed according to the typology of empowerment that Mayoux developed in her work. The emerging image of the WFP approach, as illustrated in the VGD policy intervention will be compared with Mayoux's theory regarding empowerment, the various forms of power that it can encompass and their significance for empowering women.

4.3 Empowerment and the VGD

The differentiation between different types of relations that one has with power as applied by Mayoux can illuminate the different ways in which one is empowered. In the context of the VGD, power is seen as something that the women will attain through their involvement in the integrated food aid and development program. While this may hold true in some respects, the VGD does not necessarily address as comprehensive a definition of empowerment as it may at first seem.

While WFP's Vulnerable Group Development Program targets destitute women in rural Bangladesh with consumption support, training in income generation activities and credit facilities in order to improve their food security situation, no clear linkage between these services and how the empowerment of women will be achieved is made (WFP, 1995a). Aside from acknowledging the unequal treatment of female children and adults within the household and the community, constraints upon women's activities, economic, social or personal in nature, stemming from hierarchical social

relations are not addressed by the VGD in either the project policy document or the Country Strategy of the WFP. It would seem that an end to these constrictive social relations is assumed to result automatically from an increased social awareness of the women and their increased involvement in market activities. Following from this logic, destitute women will then be empowered economically and socially. The program does not however, address issues of access versus control, legal constraints to women's empowerment, or resistance from male kin or community members to women's empowerment as a threatening change in social organization.

In applying Mayoux's framework for analyzing types of power involved in the process of women's empowerment, a fragmented picture of WFP's conceptualization of empowerment emerges. Recall from Section 2.5 Mayoux's typology of power relations includes "power within" ("increased awareness and desire for change for individual women"), "power to" ("increased individual capacity for change and increased opportunities for access"), "power over" ("changes in underlying resource and power constraints at household, community level and macro-level and individual power/action to challenge these constraints") and "power with" ("increased solidarity/joint action with other women to challenge underlying resource and power constraints at household, community and macro-level") (Mayoux, 1998: 9). This typology can be applied to the services and activities of the VGD in order to gain an understanding of the types of empowerment they can effect and what types of empowerment are included in the VGD.

Although the VGD program gives priority to women that are heads of household, indicating indirectly that a male income earner is not present in that household, it was found by the WFP that a significant number of the beneficiaries are still in some form of male-centered relationship that "...may limit [a woman's] access and control over resources and services" (WFP, 1995b:14). Credit is granted to those who have developed the required skills training and savings and this component of the development package has been self-appraised as "...on the whole very successful" (WFP, 1995b:13). This appraisal was based upon the number of borrowers, the number of total loans disbursed and the repayment performance of beneficiaries. Information about who made use of or controlled the use of the loans (i.e. power over) in a household is however, not provided. Furthermore, no information is provided

regarding who made the repayments. Who uses credit and who repays it are significant in terms of the economically and socially empowering capacity of credit (Mayoux, 1998; Wood, 1994). If a woman is in a male-centered relationship where the man makes use of the loan and then leaves the repayment obligation for the woman to deal with as the credit was in her name, the empowering capacity of micro-credit is certainly called into question. Without the power over the resource in order to determine its use the empowering capacities of credit and income are limited. Instances such as these have been found and reported upon in numerous studies of other micro-credit programs in rural Bangladesh such as those run by the Grameen Bank and the BRAC, however some form of recognition of these constraints is not included in the VGD approach. Thus, the beneficiaries of the VGD program gain access to resources previously not at their disposal such as income, savings, education, and micro-credit while their involvement in development activities such as educational and skills training is supported through food aid provisioning. However, access to resources does not ensure “power over” those resources such as income, credit or food. Inequitable social relations, which led to the formation of a class now known as destitute women and which continue to affirm a social order based upon gender and class hierarchies, remain unchallenged by the VGD approach to women’s empowerment and thus remain in place as constraints upon women’s power over resources.

“Power within” comes from an increased awareness about and desire for change and stems from other, more intangible aspects of well-being and security related to confidence, ability to make decisions regarding one’s own life chances, or other cultural, legal or political issues (Mayoux, 1998). Economic empowerment may act in some circumstances as a facilitating agent for other types of empowerment, but those other types of social and cultural empowerment are not automatic byproducts of increased access to economic resources or assets. Such assumptions can lead to the less tangible barriers to women’s empowerment, such as hierarchical and oppressive class or gender relations, being overlooked or excluded in the analysis of the situation in the programme formulation and design processes.

With respect to the “power to” type of empowerment, the VGD does offer increased opportunities for access to skills and awareness. Through the training in income

generation skills and functional literacy, women's access to income, markets and knowledge levels are all increased. Issues related to "power to" that remain unaddressed however, include a reduction in the burden of unpaid domestic work, including child care, access to assets and household property, mobility and access to the world outside the *bari* and the "removal of formal barriers to access to cultural, legal and political processes" (Mayoux, 1998: 6). A further issue that remains unclear is what the "awareness training" component of the VGD program will include. In correspondence with Naila Kabeer's understanding of empowerment, the capacity of poor women, disenfranchised by class, gender and age, to transform the "...existing social relations from their vantage point..", (Kabeer, 1994: 84) through effecting "...radical changes in law, property rights, and other institutions that reinforce and perpetuate male domination" (Batliwala, 1994:128) depends upon their increased awareness of cultural, legal and political processes which impact upon their lives and food security. However, if the awareness raising component is limited in its curriculum to awareness about hygiene and reproductive health matters in correspondence with women's domestic reproductive roles as mother's and caretakers, then the "power to" challenge dominant forces is not sufficiently or significantly addressed. Further information regarding the functional literacy and awareness training components is required in order to explore the potential of the VGD programme to empower women in a "power to" manner.

The final type of power in Mayoux's typology is that of "power with" which emphasizes the importance of solidarity, networking and "joint action with other women to challenge underlying resource and power constraints at household, community level and macro-level" (Mayoux, 1998: 9). VGD participants are encouraged to participate in groups for functional education and "other human development skills training" (WFP, 1995b: 6). We have seen in Section 3.4 that troubles associated with targeting poor women are strongly associated with oppressive class and gender relations. The VGD uses local leaders, who are vulnerable to being influenced by family and friends, in its target group beneficiary selection procedure (Khan, 1999; WFP, 1995b). This procedure may result in the selection of women from a higher class into the program. For destitute women, participation in group activities with women from other classes with whom they may have a patron/subordinate type of social relation, and upon whom they depend for work,

loans or other support in times of crisis, their ability to network to raise joint action to challenge oppressive class relations will likely be curtailed. The extent to which “power with” can be effected through participation in the VGD program is not immediately clear from the programme document.

Finally, the destitute or hard core poor have also been observed to self-select themselves out of targeted programs with micro-credit components, such as the VGD, in order to further avoid assuming debt which they may not be able to repay (Wood, 1994). This gives rise to the question whether increasing access to markets, micro-credit or other productive resources with awareness raising and educational features for the women alone are addressing the most fundamental problems faced by women in poverty in rural Bangladesh and whether the WFP’s conception of the problem of food security for destitute women goes to the heart of these problems.

Section 4.4 presents an overview of how the VGD programme approach to targeting destitute women for their empowerment compares with current theory regarding women’s empowerment.

4.4 Theory and the VGD: How do they compare?

As already discussed, conventional development planning approaches tend to identify women’s needs as those which are associated with their roles as wives, mothers and careers within the family. This section considers whether the VGD programme goes beyond this narrow conceptualization of poor women and their needs in an effort to empower them. Although group activities, income, credit and savings do not fall under the category of basic needs, how they are operationalised influences the empowering potential of the overall program. These components, used in conjunction with the other basic needs servicing components of the VGD program, have the potential of transforming the existing order of social relations of female dependency and subordination vis-à-vis men and other social classes. However, the main focus of the program activities is upon economic activities such as women’s entry into the labor and trade markets through their income generation and skills training activities. The underlying assumption appears to be that empowerment in social terms will result automatically from this particular form of economic empowerment.

Development programs tend to use the basic needs of women as the entry point rather than actually addressing the structural causes of inequality head-on (Kabeer, 1995; Pearson, 1992). Beyond this level of needs however, "...there is a further set of 'needs' (often less visible) stemming from gender-specific constraints which differentiate men's and women's terms of access to service provision" (Kabeer, 1995: 114). Unless interventions are designed to address the "more complex set of constraints that differentiate women's access to resources and opportunities from men's" the structures that perpetuate women's subordination in that context will remain intact (Kabeer, 1995:114). The program approach of the WFP, which seeks to increase women's access to resources in a setting where the existing relations of power are left intact and unchallenged, omits to address these equally significant sources of women's lack of empowerment, or disempowerment. Non-economic forces effecting poor women's food security and poverty are not given equal consideration in the WFP approach. Although this may be difficult for a development agency to operationalize, their importance should not be overlooked in the planning and design of an intervention.

If we follow the earlier discussion on women's empowerment, a development program which does not include an enabling element for the examination or transformation, initiated by the destitute themselves, of the position of poor women in rural Bangladesh through challenging the institutions which perpetuate subordination, the extent to which women's economic and social empowerment can be achieved, is limited. Rather, it will remain an integrated development intervention that distributes resources within the pre-existing social order of oppressive class, gender and age hierarchies which influence the access of poor women to productive resources.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter the VGD programme approach has been compared with current theory regarding development policy approaches to women's empowerment. The ways that the needs and interests of destitute women have been defined and approached by the World Food Program through the VGD programme, were presented. Section 4.3 explored to what extent social relations and their significance for poor women's food

security was incorporated in the VGD programme design. The WFP's approach to empowerment was then compared with Mayoux's typology of empowerment in order to see how the two compared. The WFP conceptualization of women's empowerment was deconstructed along the lines of Mayoux's typology of empowerment and compared with current theoretical approach in order to illustrate how the empowerment of poor women in rural Bangladesh is integrally related with a wider context of social relations that is possibly more pervasive and influential in their lives than their participation in the achievement of the developmental goals of the programme in which they are participating. From this comparison it was concluded that while WFP does address important aspects of marginalized rural women's poverty, or disempowerment, the VGD programme, as presented in the *Vulnerable group development: support to rural women to move out of extreme poverty* project policy document, stops short of acknowledging and addressing some of the main sources of this disempowerment such as oppressive social relations.

- V -
**Conclusions
and Policy Recommendations**

5.0 Introduction

Chapter five summarizes the activities and conclusions of this study. Section 5.1 highlights the steps taken and the main conclusions of this paper based upon the conclusions drawn from the comparison made between the WFP approach to empowering destitute women in rural Bangladesh and current theory regarding female-targeted empowerment programmes. Section 5.2 concludes the paper with recommendations for policy based upon the conclusions that have been drawn based on the findings of this study.

5.1 Summary and Conclusions

This study set out to compare theory from the field of gender planning with an actual women-targeted intervention based in rural Bangladesh. The programme in question, the Vulnerable Group Development programme, was examined for its approach to empowering destitute women through a program to increase their food security. This study's main objective was to compare the approach of the World Food Program to targeting, needs identification and the empowerment of destitute women in rural Bangladesh, as embodied in the VGD program, to current theory on the formation of gender-aware policy interventions.

Theory from the field of gender planning, specifically relating to social relations and empowerment, along with an overview of what has been done already regarding the target group destitute women was first reviewed. The notion of empowerment was deconstructed along the lines of different forms that empowerment can take. This typology was used in comparing how empowerment featured in the VGD approach to targeting destitute women with how current theory has envisioned it. In an attempt to make such a comparison, a set of interlinked research questions regarding food

security, targeting, needs identification, women's entitlements and the WFP's approach to empowering destitute women were developed.

Firstly, food insecurity was demonstrated to be quite high in rural Bangladesh with certain regions, mainly those along rivers and coastlines as well as those vulnerable to drought, having high concentrations of food insecure people. The World Food Program "Resource Allocation Map" highlights these regions, along with certain groups, are found to predominate among the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Destitute women were demonstrated to be quite vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity in the WFP's vulnerability mapping exercise, which mapped out the extent of food insecurity in Bangladesh based upon not only environmental factors but also the prevailing socio-economic characteristics of the food insecure regions.

Secondly, in relation to such a mapping exercise which cites the geographical distribution and prevalence of food insecurity among the poor in Bangladesh, the planning methodology of targeting, a planning tool for directing resources directly to those identified as eligible to aid recipients or programme participants. The World Food Programme's own method of targeting destitute women in order to minimize costs to the programme while ensuring that only those truly in need will be included in the VGD programme was then discussed.

The question of eligibility for inclusion in a targeted program raised the question of what entitlements, or claims upon resources, of women in rural Bangladesh are that impact particularly on their food security. It was found that while although women are entitled to inherit property from their fathers, economic support from their husbands, and other similar family-based entitlements such as these, their actual ability to claim these resources is highly constrained by a system of social relations based upon hierarchical and inequitable class and gender relations that marginalizes or obstructs the claims of women. In the case of poor, rural women, who are considered head of household due to the absence of a male income earner in the household, the processes of poverty and of entitlement failure were found to be even more oppressive in nature as their status of being without male kin upon whom they can depend to mediate access to resources, opens the way for them to be blamed and ostracized due to their lack of male-centered existence. Such marginalization limits safety net

options that the poor can rely upon in preventing themselves from food insecurity, as the social relations with others in the community that might otherwise serve as a buffer in times of crisis, fall away as a household, or individual poor woman, is condemned by those around her for her inability to maintain the male-centered family based entitlements which previously ensured her claim to food or other resources.

The entitlements and food security of rural woman were thus considered from a social relations perspective that highlighted the importance of relations of gender and class subordination in aggravating women's vulnerability to food insecurity. Thus, it was contended that if a programme such as the VGD sets out as its long-term objective the economic and social empowerment of women, the constraints that social relations can place upon empowerment in a variety of ways, should be taken into account in policy formulation. WFP's definition of the destitute women and their needs was examined in order ascertain whether this conceptualization of the target group also considered such constraints upon destitute women's empowerment. Upon comparing the theoretical approach to defining a target group's needs and forms that empowerment can take with the approach of the VGD it was concluded that the VGD programme addresses a fragmented conceptualization of empowerment that heavily emphasizes the economic aspects of destitute women's empowerment while omitting any significant analysis of or attempt to redress the existing order of oppressive social relations in the districts where the VGD is active. Given the demonstrated importance of social relations upon the potential for women's empowerment, the omission of this aspect of destitute women's vulnerability in the programme formulation and design could limit the empowering potential of the VGD programme. It is important to recognize the dilemma that the WFP faces in this regard, as attempting to transform gender and class relations through a programme intervention can prove at best a locally or culturally sensitive issue. It is more likely however, that transformative efforts represent a highly political and confrontational issue that the WFP likely has no mandate to address. International conventions regarding the eradication of poverty and ensuring food security for all could make greater steps towards assisting international organizations by strengthening their mandates to impact oppressive social structures at the macro-level. However, despite such a dilemma, attention to these issues in the problem analysis is a productive start to the process of change through identifying and neutralizing potential obstacles to a programme intervention,

and may help in identifying unexpected sources of support from interest groups not previously visible to programme planners and policy makers.

Apart from arguments regarding the efficiency, equity or empowering capacities of various development interventions that solely target women in order to achieve any number of development objectives, it is important to consider whether targeting women is enough. The mainstreaming of gender issues into development agendas is extremely important as has been demonstrated time and again by numerous development interventions that have failed due to an oversight on the fact that women and men, in their gendered roles in society, have distinctly different, and sometimes conflicting needs and interests. However, it is not advisable to think that by solely targeting one gender or another that sustainable development can be achieved. Although attention paid solely to women and their needs serves an extremely important end as they have been consistently left out or overlooked in the development process, any meaningful attempts to empower women also need to consider how men can be brought into the movement as a source of support through solidarity or at least through a heightened awareness. As many institutions remain male dominated in their organization, thinking and philosophy, raising awareness within those institutions and among men in general about the human rights of women as well as the morality of their equality and empowerment will help to generate support for social and economic change that will benefit both women and men in the long-term.

Finally, as Kabeer notes,

“[t]raining women in marketable skills and abilities will not give them the same degree of agency as men in the public domain as long as public institutions do not accommodate the different bodies, needs and values that they bring to the workplace. Gender equity thus goes beyond equal opportunity; it requires the transformation of the basic rules, hierarchies and practices of public institutions.” (Kabeer, 1994:86-87)

The problem, however is that,

“[w]hile most mainstream development agencies have recognized the *efficiency* of factoring gender into their policy design, and while some

acknowledge the *equity* arguments for meeting women's practical gender needs within the existing division of resources and responsibilities, few are prepared to address the underlying inequalities frequently associated with this division. The distinction between practical and strategic helps to unpack the very real tension between policies which seek to distribute resources in ways that preserve and reinforce these inequalities and those which use women's everyday practical needs as a starting point for challenging these inequalities."

In conclusion, through a comparison between the World Food Programme's Vulnerable Group Development Programme in rural Bangladesh and current gender-aware planning theory for food security and economic and social empowerment, a number of differences between the theory and actual practice came to light. Hopefully this and further attempts to bridge the two can serve to strengthen planning and policy approaches to important programmes such as the VGD, which aim essentially to increase the well being of people through enabling them to access food and other resources, thereby reducing their vulnerability to the processes of poverty and food insecurity.

5.2 Policy Recommendations Based on Conclusions

Policy recommendations derived from the findings and conclusions of this study are offered below in the hope of encouraging and strengthening efforts to mainstream a gender awareness approach to policy design and planning.

Firstly, a programme that sets out to address the issue of the economic and social empowerment of women, yet which is neither considered by the implementing organization as a gendered programme intervention, nor incorporates some form of gender-aware planning approach would do well to consider the theories and tools emerging from that field in development work. A commitment to mainstreaming a gender-sensitive approach not only to planning and policy design, but also in all administrative and financial activities and organizational procedures would ensure that gender equity could be implemented in a thorough and consistent manner in that institution's own operations and development activities (OECD/DAC, 1998). The

process of mainstreaming an awareness about gender equity requires internal change in organizations such as the WFP. Indeed, if only from an efficiency stand point, the incorporation of the interests of both men and women serve to strengthen the sustainability and potential for empowerment of development interventions, to a greater extent than simply targeting only one of the two groups based upon traditional or conventional assumptions about their needs and roles. Internal change requires awareness training for planners and policy makers about the objectives of gender aware planning and methods and tools for incorporating the new approach into their work. In this manner, needs and interests expressed by beneficiaries can be integrally incorporated in the objectives and goals of future food security interventions of the WFP.

Secondly, a participatory approach to the problem analysis of the VGD that involves all the interest groups at all stages of the planning process would result in a programme that has wider community support and cooperation. Possible constraints or obstacles arising from the local context could be identified, and addressed where possible, in order to minimize their affects on the programme outcomes. By involving women from the target group in defining their own needs and interests related to their empowerment, the VGD programme's capacity to fulfill both their practical and strategic gender needs will be enhanced. In other words, not only will the need for economic empowerment, through participation in skills training and income generation activities, be fulfilled, but concrete ways of achieving their social empowerment as an end in itself, not as a by-product of women's increased involvement in the market sphere or economic empowerment, may be illuminated.

Thirdly, inclusion of an analysis of the legal impediments to destitute women's empowerment could also provide insight into some of the more intangible aspects of entitlement failure that the target group experience. As we have seen, these intangible aspects of entitlement failure have very real consequences upon the access that destitute women have to resources. Given the important relationship between entitlements and social relations in rural Bangladesh, reinforced legal means of safeguarding women's entitlements in the face of the erosion of "good" social relations could help in preventing them from entering the processes of poverty.

A fourth and final policy recommendation is the promotion of a more involved role of men and women from the same and other social classes in the community. This could be achieved through these other group's participation in the "awareness raising" aspect of the development package. Targeting only destitute women in order to help them "graduate" beyond their current existing conditions of living by promoting their own social development without heightening awareness or sensitivity among other interest groups in a community may not prove to be enough to enable women to transform the constrictive forces on their social, economic and personal empowerment that they encounter in their society. The importance of Batliwala's distinction between the position and condition of women's lives features here as an improvement in that the material or practical conditions, of women's lives does not automatically transform their position in society. Without incorporating women and men from different levels of society in the awareness raising, or conscientization classes that integrated food aid and development programmes such as the VGD are know for, a transformation of the oppressive processes of class and gender subordination in rural Bangladesh will be difficult to achieve.

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