

## **REVISITING ‘BARGAINING’ — REFLECTIONS ON FEMINIST EXTENSIONS OF SEN’S HOUSEHOLD BARGAINING MODEL: CASE STUDIES OF GENDERED LABOUR REGIME**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines three positions in relation to women’s outside earning and household bargaining as claimed by Sen (1990). Applying feminist extensions of Sen’s notions of household in cases of gendered labor regime, this paper argues that household bargains are not only a matter of intra household relations; rather, embedded in institutionalised forms of gendered relations. The paper draws out the nature of these gendered relations conferring issues of power, agency and entitlements. It unpacks the fact that as long as power disparity operates, outside earning alone can do little to improve women’s household bargaining. Consequently, the paper concludes with an urge for additional researches, that can contribute to unpack the whole set of power dynamics that operate inside household.

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Household, Outside Earning, Bargain

### **INTRODUCTION**

Global privatisation and flexible labor market has created certain decentralised, low paid and irregular forms of jobs in the third world and women due to limited options of outside earning mostly get these jobs. Outside earning no doubt is a good option for a woman as it gives her cash money, increases her physical mobility, and avails herself to create social network through which she may gain certain skills. However, does this earning uphold her status and offers with a better bargaining position in the household? Essentially this question leads to a strong debate where existing literature has contributed to different aspects of the debate.

Viewing household as a site of cooperative conflict Sen (1990) argues that outside earning may act as a fallback position for women; through which they can assert power over household decision making. It gives them certain endowments through which they could be better entitled of their household preferences, it helps them to attain a higher perceived contribution response from other household members and as a result, strengthens their household bargaining power. Nonetheless, Sen’s model treats women as a homogenous category, and ignores the critical aspects of intra-household gender dynamics; specially, the qualitative factors that determines the limits of household bargaining. From this standpoint, feminist theorisation<sup>1</sup> of household extends Sen’s notions of household; and opines to take into consideration the whole set of institutions in which household is actually embedded. Therefore, to understand the complexities of intra-household bargaining one indeed needs to think through inside and beyond the household at the same time.

Drawing on feminist extensions of household bargaining in this paper, I focus on the three claims as affirmed by Sen (1990:144) in relation to outside earning of women and household bargaining. To examine the relationship between

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance Agarwal (1997); Chhachhi (2004); Folbre (1988); Kandiyoti (1998) and Wolfe (1997).

outside earning and household bargaining I employ case studies of gendered labor regime, particularly those of garment factories; and scrutinize issues of power<sup>2</sup>, entitlement and agency. Based on the case studies I conclude income is only one component of household bargaining; which alone cannot ensure such bargaining. There are other quantitative and qualitative factors rooted in specific socio-cultural locale which are equally important to address to strengthen women's fallback position within household.

### **OWNERSHIP AND 'POWER TO' OWN INCOME**

Income control has been identified as a critical variable in relation to women's wage work and family power (Kibria refers Blumberg, 1995: 290). Sen (1990:137) argues that access to wage income has the potential to generate egalitarian shift in household gender relations. Wage income provides women the bargaining chips through which women can assert power to household decision making. However, Sen does not consider that women's class position may have an effect on their income control. Several studies<sup>3</sup> on Bangladesh reveal that many poor female garment workers even do not have ownership on their wage let alone household decision making. Kabeer (2000:144) interviewed sixty female garment workers from Bangladesh and twenty nine of them mentioned that their income was grabbed by the male house-head. In addition to that, Sen (1990) overlooks the gendered social norms beyond household which prolongs unequal power relations within household as is revealed by Kibria (1995). She draws her findings from thirty four in-depth interviews and concludes that with exception to some young unmarried workers, employment in the garment industry does not pose a significant challenge to patriarchal family relations. Rather, women covertly trying to save some money from own wage were threatened of possible divorce by their husbands; and some were beaten badly and left alone for this reason. Hence, women not willing to jeopardies their traditional marital contract usually hand ver their whole wage to husband. As Kibria (1995:289) quotes a married garment worker:

It's natural that I give my wages to my husband. It is the custom (*niyom*) of our society to cater to the wishes of the husband. For a woman heaven is at her husband's feet. In this world a woman without a husband is no better off than a beggar on the street.

This sense of naturalising male control over women's wage calls our attention to Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'-some social orders are legitimised through discourses and become unquestioned custom and falls under the realm of 'doxa'. Thus, a country like Bangladesh where patriarchy and female seclusion is strong, women need male mediation to deal with the outside institutions. All above, a woman's identity is only counted in relation to a man; she has to be either a daughter, or a wife, or a mother; eventually, all these contribute to a situation of 'doxa'. Therefore, in presence of a patriarchal web it is not so easy for a woman to attain power even though she has an outside earning. This points our direction towards feminist extensions of Sen's household model (1990), which claim that dynamics of power relation within household is not only a single issue of earning or not earning; rather, related to social and historical views of normative understandings and practices of accepted power differences (Chhachhi quotes Moore, 2006: 253).

### **DOES OUTSIDE EARNING ENSURE BREAKDOWN POSITION?**

According to Sen (1990:135) the power to bargain over household matters is related to individual's strength or weakness in terms of breakdown position. In the specific context of household this breakdown position is the threat point where a member threatens others to withdraw his/her contribution if the bargaining were to fail (Agarwal, 1997; Osmani,

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<sup>2</sup> Power is the ability to determine decisions of one's own life and making choices. At its most basic it is the added capacity for action which actors gain from the existence of social order (Haugaard, 2003:89-90).

<sup>3</sup> For detail see, Agarwal (1997), Dannecker (2000), Kabeer (2000:39) and Kibria (1995).

2007; Sen, 1990). What determines such contribution for a woman in the household is her outside earning as claimed by Sen (1990). He is more ambitious whilst arguing that outside earning gives her certain entitlements<sup>4</sup> which includes endowments and exchange entitlement mapping through which she may assert her power within household (*ibid.*: 144). However, feminists assess intra-household dynamics from gender perspective, and opine that the relationship of power with outside income is a much narrow view which in fact transpires little about the complex range of qualitative and other quantitative factors that contributes to the actual bargaining power.

For instance, a comparative analysis by Wolfe (1997:127) on Javanese and Taiwanese daughters' degree of control over their factory wages reveals its linkage with the degree of social and economic autonomy they traditionally enjoy in household. The Javanese kinship system approves women's economic autonomy where parents allow daughters to engage in economic activities; and the daughters are able to bypass, resist and defy parental control over their labor. Thus, their traditional kinship system acts as an endowment for them through which they can exchange their entitlement of labor power and wage. In contrast, Taiwanese daughters adhere to a high degree of subordination to parents (*ibid.*). They socialize them as if they are worthless and they remain indebted to their parents for their upbringing. Since daughters permanently leave their natal home due to marriage, they need to pay back the loan before marriage. Thus, Taiwanese patriarchal kinship system imposes power over daughter's labor, and takes decision concerning when and where to work, and they are not entitled of their wages since it is fully controlled by their parents.

In Bangladesh, a significant study on female garment workers by Kibria (1995) unpacks the class influence and male authority over wage control. Lower middle class women can retain their control over their wages, whereas "lower class" women relinquish to men. A "lower class" man associates a woman's wage work with his economic impotence; therefore, seizing control of a woman's income he affirms his economic headship. Contrary to this, a lower middle class man affirms his economic authority by allowing a woman's control over her wages (Kabeer, 2000:146; Kibria, 1995: 306). For lower-middle class women, their class status acts as a fallback position through which they can bargain over their wages.

Another endowment for women working outside could be their job based entitlement. Chhachhi (2008) illustrates from female garment workers in India, where their strong association with trade union influenced their intra household entitlements. Through the experience of wage work and collective action together, they acquired self-confidence, organizational and advocacy skills, knowledge on how society works and all this resulted into improving women's household bargaining. Within their households a process of democratisation of gender relation was started which enabled older women to assert areas of autonomy and improve own well-being. Younger women were making choices to work, select their own marriage partners and continue working after marriage. Here, outside earning together with the social network through trade unionism acted as a breakdown position for these garment workers through which they exchanged their household entitlements. Therefore, households are embedded in and connected to other institutions. Adding to that, there are social norms, different kinship systems, class influence, diverse nature of conjugal rights and local cultural conceptions of entitlement which influence women's bargaining power by determining the limits and approach of bargain. Accordingly, outside earning alone cannot ensure breakdown position in household; rather there are extra-household environmental parameters that also contribute to intra-household bargaining.

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<sup>4</sup> A person's entitlement is the full range of services that he or she can acquire converting his or her endowments-assets and resources including labour power (Devereux, 2001: 246).

## PERCEIVED INTEREST RESPONSE OF “ALTRUSTIC WOMEN”-ISSUES OF AGENCY, WELLBEING AND ALTRUISM

Sen (1990:127) argues that the outcome of bargaining will be less favorable to the person who attaches less value to own wellbeing compared to the wellbeing of others ('perceived interest response'). He views agency<sup>5</sup> as different from individual wellbeing, and states that women in traditional society attach less value to own wellbeing vis-à-vis others in the family. Thus, women working outside give preferences to other's choices as they are naturally altruistic. They spend the whole earning for the family wellbeing or offer it to the family head to use for family purposes, and this is how they affirm their agency (*ibid.*). The problem with Sen's "altruistic image" is — it maintains a tactic silence against covert agency such as income-retention and non-compliance (Wolfe, 1997:129). With this concern, Agarwal (1997:25) criticises Sen's assertion that women are unaware of their self-interest; rather she points to Scott's 'weapons of the weak' (Hart, 1997:20). Scott places less emphasis than Sen does on women's false perception of their self-interest. Rather, she pinpoints the external constraints that impinge women's agency to prioritize individual preferences.

For instance, in Bangladesh female garment workers generally tend to maintain secrecy, a 'weapon of the weak'; since the ideological space for their personal control over resources is reserved. In some households they exercise covert agency to have control over some part of their incomes. Some lie to their husbands regarding actual wage amount and some hide overtime allowances. These women withhold information about their earnings as a way of retaining secret control over them. Kabeer (2000:150) mentions a number of cases of covert agency of the garment workers. For example, Sahara's husband wastes a major proportion of his household income on his gambling and drinking habits.

In consequence, Sahara hands over her monthly wages to him at his insistence but keeps secret the overtime and saves it to her sister as her insurance for the future. Rupban not only keeps back the fact of overtime earnings from her husband, but also lies about the actual amount of her regular wage (*ibid.*). All these examples question Sen's conception that women lack a correct perception of their best interests and bring to notice that there are material constraints that persuade women to behave as such. Under the patrilocal and patrilineal tradition of Bangladesh the women occupy an inferior status, and it is expected that they should always prioritise others interests vis-à-vis theirs. Hence, drawing on feminist extensions of Sen's bargaining model, I would like to opine that it is still controversial whether there is a pure altruism, or women due to limited outside options and weak fallback position do not apply overt agency; rather, seek to maximise family welfare may be for their long term self interest. This controversy opens spaces for further research in this area.

### ‘PERCEIVED CONTRIBUTION RESPONSE’ VS ACTUAL CONTRIBUTION

Whatever may be the reason, certainly woman spends a lion portion of her income for household welfare. However, question arises how this contribution is perceived by the household members? Sen (1990:136) claims whilst counting the respective outcomes if a person is perceived as making larger contribution to the overall wealth of the group, the collusive solution would be more favorable to that person, and outside earning can give women such higher perceived contribution response. Sen's such claim calls our attention to the following apprehensions:

First of all, Sen measures household contribution through mainstream macroeconomic scale where only paid work is treated as productive work. Thus, he maintains a strategic silence towards women's unacknowledged care work which essentially fails to notice that some contribution may remain hidden because of gendered social norms. In addition,

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<sup>5</sup> Agency is the capacity of people to decide and act according to their own free will (Berner, 1998:4)

perceived response also depends on symbolic meanings and interpretations of that income by the family members (Kibria, 1995). For an illustration, in case of Taiwanese daughters whom I mentioned before, their income contribution was seen as their duty to pay back to parents the cost of their upbringing; and added no endowment that could uphold their household bargaining position.

Furthermore, perception about women's contribution is also prejudiced by gendered ideologies (Agarwal, 1997). Traditional gendered labor order which is based on sexual division of labor treats men as breadwinner and women as unskilled, supplementary labor force (Fraser, 1997; Kabeer, 2008; Pearson, 1998). Hence, even in exchange of same labor women receive fewer wages than men; which contributes to systematic undervaluation of women's outside work. Once women enter into the household with this income such perceptions also bleakly affect their perceived contribution response by the household members even though they may yield the whole income to the household. Thus, it leads to Agarwal's conjecture of 'incorrect perceptions', undervaluation of women's waged contribution reduce their bargaining power (Agarwal, 1997: 11).

Finally, albeit in some cases women may have perceived contribution response, their bargaining power still differs in relation to the life cycle status embedded in specific socio-cultural norms and practices which is ignored by Sen who considered "women as a homogenous category". As Chhachhi (2006:252) recognises that gendered cultural norms and practices may confer different degrees of power and entitlements with a sharp distinction between the ways in which the income of wives and daughters are perceived vis-à-vis their greater autonomy. Her study in India (*ibid.*) shows despite the substantial and visible nature of Indian wives' earnings, it did not impulsively lead to direct confrontation or assertion of absolute power over their incomes, rather they had to apply covert strategies to have control over part of their income.

In contrast, daughters' contribution to the household was more complicated as was non-recognised, often seen as earning for dowry or a time pass before marriage (*ibid.* : 254). Yet, it still improved their household status, and worked as a fallback position for them through which they could bargain and assert choices. It offered them a power to choose particularly to taking decisions about further education, delaying marriage and choosing their marriage partners. In case of wives, it was only in open marital conflict that they overtly used their earning capacity to bargain; however this does not mean that they took 'exit option'. Social opprobrium attached to divorced women and the persistent needs for male protection in a strong patriarchal milieu in fact hold back their exit option. Therefore, in strong presence of patriarchal ideologies the collusive solution of household bargaining cannot be favorable to women.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I examine the correlation between women's outside earning and their bargaining position within household. To scrutinise such correlation I choose cases from gendered labor regime and apply feminist extensions of Sen's (1990) household notions. Based on the findings, I reiterate the fact that the issue of bargaining should consider the gendered power dynamics within and beyond household. Applying feminist extensions on each of the three positions as was claimed by Sen (1990) I comprehend there is no straight forward answer whether outside earning can give women bargaining power or not; rather there are specific socio-cultural norms, local and cultural perceptions of entitlements, different kinship systems and explicit historical normative understandings of power that determine what can be bargained about. In relation to the first position, I would say income earning is only one factor.

There are other factors, namely supportive kinship system, socio-economic status, any asset, social network etcetera are likewise significant to enhance women's fallback position. Concerning the second position, I would opine patriarchal socialisation process and cultural perceptions of entitlement also influence household resource distribution

prioritising household wellbeing vis-à-vis individual preferences. Therefore, without addressing these issues, rather just treating women as biologically altruistic actually reinforces certain patriarchal norms. Regarding the third position, I would argue it is very limited in the sense of ignoring systematic undervaluation of women's contribution and gendered power relations within and beyond household.

Hence, examining the three positions as claimed by Sen (1990), I agree with feminist extensions of Sen's notion of household, which is income is only one necessary component, and there are other quantitative and qualitative factors within and beyond household to enhance household bargaining. These factors are entrenched in specific socio-cultural locale; in consequence, more empirical investigation is needed to understand the complex household bargaining embedded in specific context, to improve the gender relations thereafter. To conclude, I would like to offer a set of suggestions:

- Institutional changes are needed that hinder women's ownership of income.
- Harmful cultural practices that reinforce women's inferior status should be identified and strong movement is required to change those.
- Careful inquiry and strong legal initiatives need to be undertaken to provide female labours with a better working condition; and they should be encouraged to take part in trade unions as in many cases active unionism has improved women's fallback position.
- Citizenship based entitlement definitely contributes to women's fallback position; therefore state can endow with a small land or universal basic income to women as a recognition of their unpaid care work which will also improve women's 'perceived contribution response'.
- On top of all, additional research is needed to unmask the complex web of intra-household power relations and not only females but males as well need to be researched to have a broader understanding of household bargaining.

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