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Taking critical dialogic accountability into the field: Engaging contestation around microfinance and women's empowerment

Farzana Aman Tanima^{a,*}, Judy Brown^b, Jan Wright^a, Vera Mackie^a^a University of Wollongong, Australia^b Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper mobilises Dillard and Vinnari's (2019) proposals for critical dialogic accountability practices that address the concerns of marginalised and under-represented groups, rather than privileging finance capital. We approach this through participatory fieldwork with(in) an NGO that provides development programs, including microfinance, intended to empower poor women in Bangladesh. We engage with microfinance representatives, women borrowers, their husbands, program volunteers and gender change activists on the problems and conditions of possibility associated with microfinance and women's empowerment programs. By engaging competing discourses and constructing counter-narratives, based on poor women's lived experiences with neoliberal microfinance programs, we demonstrate the potential of critical dialogic praxis to support marginalised groups' struggles to hold powerholders accountable for their (in)actions and to promote more enabling development approaches.

1. Introduction

The overarching research question guiding this study concerns how critical dialogic accounting and accountability (CDAA) praxis can support the empowerment of marginalised groups, especially poor women in developing countries. Specifically, we investigate how Dillard and Vinnari's (2019) proposals for responsibility networks can be applied to the politically contentious area of microfinance and women's empowerment to highlight the harmful impacts of neoliberal microfinance programs and to promote more enabling alternatives.

Since the 1980s, microfinance has become inextricably linked with the neoliberal development agenda. Microfinance programs employ market principles purportedly "to achieve socially progressive goals, such as promoting economic development of marginalised communities and empowering the poor" (Shakya & Rankin, 2008, p. 1214). Small-scale provision of loan finance is deemed to empower poor women by enabling them to operate micro-enterprises or otherwise engage in income-generating activities. Bodies such as the World Bank claim it empowers women by pointing to correlations between microfinance and "increases in household income, human development indicators, women's decision-making power, mobility and voice" (Shakya & Rankin, 2008, p. 1215). However, gender and development (GAD) scholars are sceptical of the success or value of microfinance, questioning its capacity to challenge the class-based and patriarchal relations poor women are embedded in. Rather they claim microfinance exacerbates inequalities by ignoring power relations, framing poverty and empowerment individualistically, prompting women to discipline themselves and their

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Farzanat@uow.edu.au (F.A. Tanima), Judy.brown@vuw.ac.nz (J. Brown), jwright@uow.edu.au (J. Wright), vera@uow.edu.au (V. Mackie).

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peers, and trapping women in debt spirals (Karim, 2011; Parmer, 2003; Shakya & Rankin, 2008; Weber, 2016).

NGO accountability literature demonstrates that donor pressures have shifted the focus of microfinance institutions (MFIs) from social justice to financial sustainability (Dixon, Ritchie, & Siwale, 2006; Jacobs, Habib, Musyoki, & Jubb, 2012; Siwale & Ritchie, 2013). Many NGO studies call for grassroots participation and downward accountability to advance the interests of marginalised groups through practices such as “participatory reviews, stakeholder focus groups or social auditing” (O’Leary, 2017, p. 23). Such initiatives are viewed as a way of enabling NGOs to identify and address beneficiaries’ needs more effectively (Dixon et al., 2006; Marini, Andrew, & Van der Laan, 2017; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2010). However, achieving accountability to less powerful groups is fraught with difficulties and is not simply about “giving” them a seat at the table. While powerholders, such as NGOs, donors and global development agencies may state commitments to grassroots participation in policy documents, these are often operationalised in tokenistic or instrumental ways (Alawattage & Azure, 2021; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2010). Subordinate groups often do not have the power or resources to make their voices heard or exercise their rights. They are also understandably reluctant to question or criticise those who control access to resources for “fear of ‘biting the hand that feeds them’” (Unerman & O’Dwyer, 2010, p. 481). For example, Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe (2011) found participatory practices were used by local elites, to further their own agendas; with villagers treating “elites’ decisions as ‘correct’ and ‘uncontestable’” (p. 409). Moreover, while powerholders may express a “felt accountability” to stakeholders, they are highly selective about who and what issues they engage with (Brown & Dillard, 2015a).

Critical accounting scholars argue that prior studies demonstrate that NGOs and development agencies cannot necessarily be assumed to promote the interests of poor and marginalised groups, and that new accountability approaches are required (Hopper & Tanima, 2018; Tanima, Brown, & Dillard, 2020). They also highlight the politics of neoliberal development and how concepts such as accountability, participation and empowerment have been depoliticised when incorporated into mainstream discourses, with accounting technologies constituting a key component of governance regimes that privilege finance capital over democratic accountability (Alawattage & Azure, 2021; Brown & Tregidga, 2017; Cooper & Lapsley, 2021). Hence, they view many interventions as politically naïve and call for approaches linked to contemporary struggles and social movements (Brown & Dillard, 2013a) that recognise that holding powerholders to account requires a “collective questioning of power” (Cooper & Lapsley, 2021, p. 18). Voluntary downward accountability initiatives, by contrast, rely heavily on the benevolence of dominant powerholders, leaving it to them to identify stakeholders and manage engagements, meaning institutional change strategies often lack “teeth” (Fox, 2015). Accountability is portrayed as something bestowed from above rather than struggled for from below and risks reinforcing beneficiary dependency and passivity (Kingston, Furneaux, de Zwaan, & Alderman, 2020; Scobie, Lee, & Smyth, in press).

Our study responds to critiques of conventional accountability approaches by focusing on research that calls for CDAA practices that address ideological differences, power relations and marginalised perspectives through “an agonistic ethos of engagement” (Brown, Dillard, & Hopper, 2015, p. 626). For example, Kingston et al. (2020) advocate moving from monologic to dialogic forms of accountability in NGOs to promote accountability on beneficiaries’ terms and position them as key actors in accountability processes; responding to Brown and Dillard’s (2015b, p. 626) call to interrogate “what is accounted for, how it is accounted, and on whose terms”. They illustrate how participatory evaluation, informed by agonistics, might help enact accountability on beneficiaries’ terms and change power dynamics within NGOs by making dominant hegemonies visible “whilst presenting counter hegemonies as possible” (Kingston et al., 2020, p. 454). Yasmin, Ghafran, and Haslam (2021), in calling for beneficiary-focused accountability, similarly suggest dialogic accounting can help “take beneficiaries more seriously” (p. 4) through, for example, localized account-giving practices and consideration of “the wider societal issues placing beneficiaries in their situations” (p. 10).¹ In taking ideological differences seriously, Alawattage and Azure (2021) problematise the World Bank’s social accountability model with its neoliberal focus on efficiency drawing on Foucault’s governmentality and agonistic democracy. Scobie, Milne, and Love (2020) study “diverse practices of the giving and demanding of democratic accountability” surrounding conflicts over deep-sea petroleum exploration, highlighting dissensus as fundamental to disrupting extant hierarchies and transformative change (see also Brown & Tregidga, 2017). Collectively, these studies call for approaches that address accountability as a politically contested concept,² counter-hegemonic perspectives and power relations. Rather than focusing on organisational powerholders “giving” voice to marginalised groups, they also call for greater attention to accountability strategies by which less powerful groups can (and do) assert voice by speaking up, out and back for themselves (Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2009; Brown & Dillard, 2013a; Brown & Tregidga, 2017; Scobie et al., 2020).

Studies such as Brown et al. (2015) and Gallhofer, Haslam, and Yonekura (2015) have urged academics to engage with groups such as poor women, indigenous communities and social movements to add voice to counter-hegemonic perspectives opposing

¹ In keeping with CDAA’s underpinnings in agonistic democracy, we prefer the idea of “citizen-focused accountability” based on “active citizens” pursuing accountability and empowerment through collective action (Brown et al., 2015; Tregidga & Milne, 2020), rather than use the term “beneficiary” which “suggests dependence on an organisation” (Scobie et al., in press, p. 4).

² Thus we reject technocratic-managerial approaches to accountability dominant under neoliberalism by adopting an explicitly political theorisation of accountability from development studies “as struggles by the poor to hold the powerful to account” (Newell & Wheeler, 2006, p. 1) and examining how CDAA might add to their political force. In the microfinance arena the major powerholders of interest are MFIs, donors, governments and global development institutions. In terms of gender justice, politicised understandings of accountability offer “a frame that goes beyond gentle invitations to join in to harder talk about patriarchy, privilege and power” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 409) and thus counter the politics of micro-accountability (Alawattage et al., 2019).

neoliberalism and other harmful ideologies (such as patriarchy and racism) and support progressive change. As [Brown et al. \(2015\)](#) reflect, CDAA can potentially support the development of political alliances linking diverse accountability struggles through “chains of equivalence”³ and interventions in institutional/extra-institutional settings. However, while studies based on CDAA and agonistics have foregrounded marginalised and critical voices through empirical studies (e.g. [Alawattage & Azure, 2021](#); [Kingston et al., 2020](#); [Tregidga & Milne, 2020](#); [Scobie et al., 2020](#); [Tanima et al., 2020](#)), few have directly engaged with marginalised groups or activists to establish spaces for constructing alternative accounts or alliances for change. Hence the agonistic ethos promoted regarding developing spaces, practices and/or institutions for understanding marginalised groups’ struggles, fostering political subjectivity, contesting dominant discourses and envisioning alternatives has been largely underdeveloped ([Brown et al., 2015, p. 641](#)).

[Dillard and Vinnari \(2019\)](#) propose a way of pursuing accountability-based accounting that takes marginalised and critical voices seriously, through responsibility networks. This involves identifying relevant constituencies, understanding their concerns, interests and struggles, and constructing accountability criteria based on the participation of marginalised groups and activists. Unlike conventional stakeholder engagement, the process is not organised or controlled by the entity being held accountable but facilitated by groups such as political action committees. [Dillard and Vinnari \(2019, p. 31\)](#) also emphasise that information disclosure or access to pluralistic accounts will not, on its own, lead to change. As [Cooper and Johnston \(2012, p. 626\)](#) put it: “what is the purpose of being given many broad-ranging accounts if you have no power to change things?”. Accounting systems must be associated with “meaningful consequences”; for example, accountability strategies by which marginalised groups can exert pressure on and make demands of powerholders.

While [Dillard and Vinnari \(2019\)](#) propose a possible framework for CDAA engagements, including for critical academics to actively intervene in politically contentious areas, much work remains in putting empirical flesh on these ideas. We see participatory fieldwork as one form of praxis through which academics and others can collaborate to create spaces that enable critique of dominant hegemonies and the development of alternatives. Hence, we sought to investigate how [Dillard and Vinnari’s \(2019\)](#) approach could be applied to examine the problems, challenges and conditions of possibility associated with NGO-based microfinance and women’s empowerment programs.

In this study, we engaged with an NGO in Bangladesh called [Integrated Social Development Effort \(ISDE\)](#) that has experience with microfinance, both before and after neoliberalisation, and that has discontinued part of its microfinance operations. In addition to microfinance, ISDE has other programs, including a Gender Mainstreaming and Non Formal Education (GM/NFE) program aimed at promoting gender equality through grassroots participation. This program provided us with access to various groups with an interest in microfinance, including ISDE representatives, women borrowers and their husbands, program volunteers and gender change activists. Based on CDAA theorisations of accountability and engagement ([Bebbington, Brown, Frame, & Thomson, 2007](#); [Brown & Dillard, 2013a](#); [Dillard & Vinnari, 2019](#)), we used interviews, group discussions and counter-narratives to investigate the problems with conventional MFI accountability systems, the impacts of microfinance on poor women’s lives, and conditions of possibility for more enabling microfinance programs. Our findings indicate CDAA praxis can help foreground the voices of poor women and provide a platform for progressive change.

This study contributes to critical accounting literature and developing practical efforts to address the politics of accountability. Firstly, it demonstrates the actual and potential benefits of CDAA praxis, especially for marginalised groups, including: forming responsibility networks to interrogate the accountability failures of dominant powerholders (here in relation to microfinance and women’s empowerment); challenging dominant discourses and proposing counter-hegemonic alternatives (e.g. based on GAD discourse); and building alliances for change. Secondly, our study directly engages with marginalised groups and related activists to explore their lived experiences with neoliberal development through interviews, group discussions and counter-narratives; giving visibility to poor women’s struggles with microfinance minimalism and gender change activists’ proposals for change. Thirdly, it highlights the potential for interventions by critical academics to foster democratic development by constructing “safe spaces” for marginalised groups and local activists to critically interrogate the impacts of neoliberalisation, co-construct counter-accounts and develop context-specific strategies for change.

The paper is organised as follows. [Section 2](#) outlines the CDAA framework guiding the study and briefly reviews literature on microfinance accountability. [Section 3](#) describes the research setting, participants and methods. [Section 4](#) reports the results of our study and [Section 5](#) provides discussion and concluding reflections.

2. Theoretical framework: CDAA and microfinance accountability

[Dillard and Vinnari’s \(2019\)](#) main argument with conventional accounting concerns its obsession with disclosures that prioritise finance capital over other interested groups, a system they refer to as accounting-based accountability. In the NGO/MFI context, studies have detailed how a focus on financial reporting to donors and regulators leads to “mission drift” away from social objectives ([Battilana & Dorado, 2010](#); [Dixon et al., 2006](#); [Hopper & Tanima, 2018](#)) and creates micro-accountability regimes that support neoliberal governmentality ([Alawattage, Graham, & Wickramasinghe, 2019](#)). [Alawattage et al. \(2019\)](#) demonstrate how microfinance acts as a disciplinary tool by creating “bankable individual entrepreneurs” (p. 38) who monitor each other’s financial behaviours, with micro-accountability being “fundamental to the production of the neoliberal self at the margins of the global economy” (p. 39).

³ In agonistics, chains of equivalence denote different groups (e.g. women, workers, poor farmers, indigenous peoples, labor unions and social movements) with distinct accountability struggles, histories and political demands mobilising as a “people” in a way that recognises they are equivalently (albeit differently) fighting against oppressive social orders ([Mouffe, 2018](#); [Brown et al., 2015, pp. 643-644](#)).

Through the assembly of “biopolitical accounts” of women’s savings and borrowing, debt-dependent women are disciplined and controlled in efforts to make lending to the poor profitable. Tanima et al. (2020) denote these neoliberal practices as “microfinance minimalism” and argue this approach reinforces extant power relations by depoliticising feminist understandings of empowerment and solidarity. For example, high loan repayment rates and increased household consumption levels are typically evaluated as program success and misleadingly equated with empowerment, obscuring the “dark side” of microfinance such as the intense pressures for loan repayments that produce new forms of dominance over women (Wright, 2006).

Due to the focus on finance capital and wider neoliberal trends, participatory practices recognised as key for social accountability in NGOs/MFIs have remained underdeveloped (O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2008; Tanima & Hidayah, 2018). Participation has often been tokenistic, with subordinate groups rarely included in policy or decision-making processes (O’Leary, 2017; O’Dwyer & Unerman, 2010). Large power asymmetries also mean constituents fear questioning those who control access to valued resources (Unerman & O’Dwyer, 2010, p. 481) making participatory initiatives susceptible to the agendas of powerful elites from local to global levels (Alawattage & Azure, 2021; Jayasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2011). Stakeholder engagement is framed as a self-evidently “good thing”; a consensual dialogue to find voluntarist solutions that benefit everyone (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019, p. 21). However, such notions of stakeholder engagement are poorly equipped to address conflicting views about accountability, neoliberalism and citizens’ rights, and they ignore or gloss over power relations (Brown & Dillard, 2013a; Tregidga & Milne, 2020). These weaknesses are recognised in the NGO/MFI literature, which highlights grassroots participation as an increasingly important aspect of development programs, but often finds it is not empowering in practice. Neoliberal social accountability initiatives that purportedly “empower” citizens through a “rhetoric of participation” have often been used by dominant powerholders “to ‘rubber stamp’ and legitimise pre-defined development solutions through selectivity of participants and narrow terms of consultation” (Alawattage & Azure, 2021, p. 16).⁴

Building on prior CDAA literature, theorised using Mouffe’s (2013) agonistics, Dillard and Vinnari (2019) call for the development of accountability-based accounting systems, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

Agonistics presumes a pluralistic society consisting of multiple constituencies with divergent ideological perspectives and varying concerns, interests, values and power. Following Dillard and Vinnari (2019), CDAA identifies interested constituencies, and their accountability demands, through an explicitly political process. Unlike conventional stakeholder engagement, this is “initiated outside the entity being held accountable, by groups such as political action committees, nongovernment organizations and government entities” (p. 21). Converging around common political projects, for example regarding social justice, interested constituencies form “responsibility networks” (p. 21). These networks are not presumed to be “homogenous or permanent”, but to recognise “the need to work together toward a common end at a given point in time and/or with respect to a particular issue” (p. 21). Responsibility networks treat accountability as a contested concept and engage over “the evaluation criteria, and thus the basis for constructing accountability systems” (p. 21).⁵ Particular attention is paid to groups silenced or marginalised by dominant ideologies such as neoliberalism.

Our study explores participatory fieldwork as one form of praxis through which academics and others might engage to enable critique of dominant hegemonies and advance alternatives. While Dillard and Vinnari (2019) clearly make the case for challenging neoliberal ideas, values and practices, there is little in their CDAA framework regarding how counter-hegemonic perspectives might be engaged or how academics and activists might support marginalised groups in their accountability struggles; to enhance both their “voice” and “teeth” and develop “enabling environments for collective action” (Fox, 2015, p. 346).

A key challenge is to identify ways of *working with* rather than *speaking for* marginalised groups, whilst also recognising how dominant discourses “constrain what is thinkable, sayable, or actionable” (Tanima et al., 2020, p. 3). While critical academics may lack lived experiences of oppression, and arguably cannot articulate subordinate groups’ positions without meaningful engagements, they do have access to theoretical lenses related to gender, class and cultural inequalities – and their connections to wider power structures – that may enable subordinate groups to view their situations in terms of accountability struggles and systemic failures, rather than seeing themselves as “personally unfortunate” (Narayan et al., 2000, p. 6). From an agonistic perspective, it is important to “surface the political” through engagement of both dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses, and to examine their influence in specific contexts (Tanima et al., 2020). Social identities are not viewed as “pre-given” or autonomously created; rather they are (re)shaped through discursive interactions with exposure to divergent discourses helping open up people’s self-understandings (Brown, 2009, p. 322). Thus we view agonistic engagement as a way of avoiding the dangers of romanticising “local knowledge” and/or “participation” in ways that can privilege local elites and enable neoliberalism (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). More optimistically, exposure to counter-hegemonic perspectives can also encourage critical reflection on the part of powerful actors who may otherwise adopt dominant discourses unthinkingly (Brown et al., 2015). CDAA also rejects the idea of presenting blueprints for social change, with praxis requiring ongoing cycles of action and reflection (Bebbington et al., 2007; Brown, 2009). Here again, academics can work with marginalised groups and activists to devise context-specific strategies for holding powerholders to account and promoting progressive change.

While we share Dillard and Vinnari’s (2019) opposition to conventional accounting’s obsession with finance capital, we are cautious about their continued focus on organisational reporting, albeit with evaluation criteria supplied by relevant constituencies. Prior research shows reporting practices often become decoupled from organisational operations with even the best intended performance reporting leading to a culture of “keeping up appearances” at the expense of organisational learning (Cooper & Lapsley, 2021, p. 3). Participants in responsibility networks may also continue to (un)consciously articulate their accountability demands

⁴ See also Cooke and Kothari (2001) on “the tyranny of participation”.

⁵ In previous work, Dillard and his colleagues (Dillard & Yuthas, 2013; Dillard, Yuthas, & Baudot, 2016) have also proposed CDAA as useful for designing, implementing and evaluating MFI information systems.

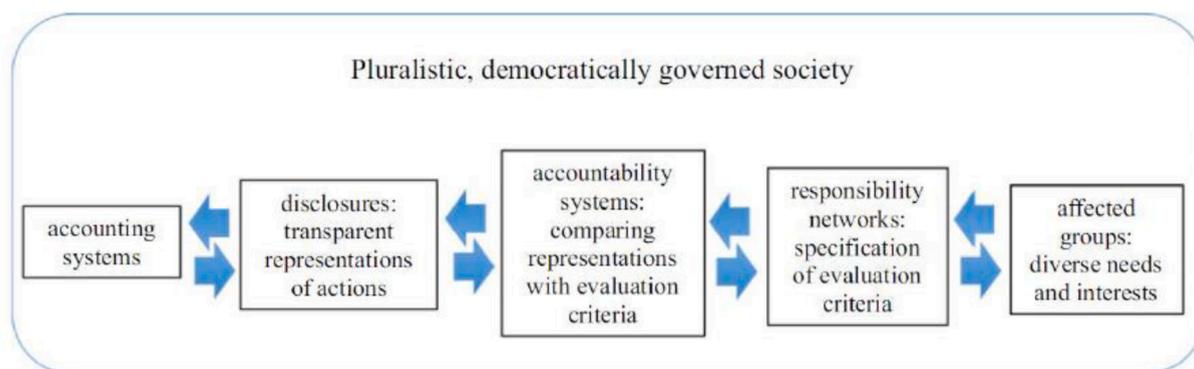


Fig. 1. Critical dialogic accountability – accountability-based accounting systems. .
Source: Dillard and Vinnari (2019, p. 20)

within the confines of neoliberal discourse. Without a more fundamental shift in approach, we fear counter-hegemonic positions will remain sidelined.

Hence, Dillard and Vinnari's proposals require greater attention to alternative accountability strategies, such as counter-accounts, that might have more "political force" (Cooper & Johnston, 2012, p. 603) and the creation of "safe spaces" where marginalised groups can openly discuss their struggles and develop strategies for change (Molisa, Vandangombo, & Brown, 2012, p. 19). This recognises that subordinate groups are not necessarily as "governable" as powerholders anticipate and may resist (neoliberal) governance technologies through what Alawattage and Wickramasinghe (2009), following Scott (1985), refer to as "weapons of the weak".⁶ In line with this, we see counter-accounts (e.g. in the form of counter-narratives) as one way for "the governed" to speak back to the dominant discourses to which they are subjected (Lehman, Annisette, & Agyemang, 2016; Morrison & Lowe, 2021). Articulated to collective action, they provide potentially potent accountability strategies for expressing dissenting views and asserting equality (Brown & Tregidga, 2017).

Accordingly, we mobilise Dillard and Vinnari's (2019) proposals for responsibility networks in a way that explicitly draws political frontiers and engages counter-hegemonic perspectives. We identify microfinance minimalism as a politically contentious issue with significant implications for the (dis)empowerment of poor women in developing countries. We engage with an NGO in Bangladesh (ISDE) that has discontinued part of its microfinance operations⁷ for two main reasons. Firstly, as elaborated below, the first author had a well-established relationship with them, through an ongoing case study, started in 2012, on microfinance and women's empowerment. ISDE has continued to show interest in CDAA as way of advancing its commitments to gender equality, not least due to its own struggles with neoliberalism. Secondly, this interest enabled us, as academics, to become part of a responsibility network outside the entities being held accountable (which included, but went beyond ISDE) aimed at supporting the empowerment of poor women. In particular, it allowed access to women with loans from other MFIs, who participated in ISDE's GM/NFE program, and gender change activists with ideas about how more enabling microfinance programs might be developed; providing an action space where neoliberal approaches to microfinance could be critiqued and re-evaluated. This helped flip the question from: "what can accounting hold someone accountable for?" to "what accounting [and engagement] is needed for a specific accountability system?" (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019, p. 22).

As discussed, CDAA entails taking an explicitly political approach to accountability by engaging divergent discourses. Here, the discourses of interest are the neoliberal discourse of microfinance minimalism, which views women's empowerment as a project of "financial inclusion" and cultivation of "rational economic women", and the counter-hegemonic GAD discourse which views empowerment as a "citizenship project". We outline the two discourses below, focusing on points of contestation most pertinent to this study.⁸

Neoliberal discourse takes an uncritical and depoliticised approach to development and microfinance programs. Where the rights of poor women are addressed, the focus is increasingly on their "economic right" to access credit (Bayulgen, 2013). Proponents of microfinance minimalism suggest it results in transformations of gender roles and improved women's status within households and communities (Kabeer, 1994). In addition to enhancing individual agency, microfinance is promoted in terms of its broader socio-economic benefits for families and local communities. Women are thus conceptualised as economic agents who can lift themselves and others out of poverty.

MFI accounting practices are focused on accountability to financiers and internal control; and reporting financial performance to senior managers, donors and regulatory authorities. Favourable financial performance of MFIs is taken as a proxy for women's empowerment, with increases in the number of loans and high repayment rates taken as evidence of women's increasing economic

⁶ These include everyday forms of resisting and transgressing disciplinary controls (e.g. through unpredictability, feigned ignorance or silence). See also Brown et al. (2015, pp. 635-636) on how "the governed... think and act otherwise" through "practices of freedom".

⁷ ISDE previously had loan centres in Chittagong city and Maheshkhali village. In 2015, it discontinued its microfinance operations in Chittagong.

⁸ See Tanima et al. (2020) for detailed discussion of these two discourses.

independence and self-reliance. The positive impacts of microfinance, considered as “virtuous spirals”, are also showcased through narratives of women’s entrepreneurial successes, and how they lead to wider family and community benefits.

Grassroots participation is aimed at the efficient running of microfinance programmes and ensuring women’s accountability to each other, fieldworkers and senior managers for loan repayments. Following regulatory frameworks and industry norms, women monitor each other’s loan repayments, with group members jointly liable for loans. The focus is on developing financially responsible attitudes to ensure the financial sustainability of MFIs. In the process of monitoring themselves and their peers, women also learn to become and see themselves as “rational economic women”. There are no structured opportunities for questioning or promoting critical reflection on neoliberal development, oppressive cultural norms, corrupt institutions or regulatory failures.

In short, MFIs’ accountability and governance structures are based on neoliberal market logics and their accounting practices, consistent with neoliberal governmentality, are aimed at the “responsibilization” of women. Accounting systems are employed to classify, quantify, screen, manage and monitor women in instrumental ways; to “sift and sort out the acceptable from the unacceptable” (Lehman et al., 2016, p. 44). Performance measures and targets are focused on loan disbursements and repayment rates and any grassroots participation is commercially-oriented in line with the priorities of finance capital.

GAD discourse, by contrast, takes a critical approach to neoliberal development and microfinance programs. Its proponents support a rights-based approach to development, aimed at empowering women as active and engaged citizens. GAD scholars are highly critical of microfinance minimalism, pointing to field studies that detail how microfinance can change family dynamics in harmful ways and lead to new forms of domination against women (e.g. Bateman, 2010; Karim, 2011; Parmer, 2003; Weber, 2016). Husbands or other male family members coerce women to take out loans, leaving women, who are financially responsible for the debt, facing intense pressures from MFIs for repayments. Increasing reliance on microfinance also often means more arduous and unpleasant work for women, so loans can be repaid. A concern is that women have to use loans for everyday survival, partly due to reduced social welfare under neoliberal development and a reduction in services previously provided by NGOs before their shift towards microfinance minimalism. Rather than using loans for business ventures, loans are frequently taken out to cover old debts; with women borrowing from several MFIs (or local moneylenders) simultaneously to pay loan instalments on time, leading to debt spirals.

While microfinance has undergone sustained critique, some GAD scholars see possibilities for developing more enabling microfinance programmes. Rather than (or at least in addition to) entrepreneurial training, they favour programs that promote critical reflection on and advocacy of the rights of the poor. Accordingly, they emphasise awareness-raising activities that challenge structural barriers to women’s empowerment, including oppressive cultural norms, inadequate or non-existent social services, corrupt practices and regulatory failures. The aim is to foster subject positions based around the identity of “active citizens” rather than “rational economic women” (Rankin, 2001; Weber, 2016) with significant implications for accountability relations. Here, as in CDAA, GAD scholars emphasise that identities are neither singular nor fixed but rather shaped through dominant discourses and counter-hegemonic struggles. Both powerholders and marginalised groups may exhibit contradictions in the positions they identify with (as “plural” or “conflicted” selves); thus it is important not to depict either in overly homogenous terms. Powerholders may, for example, be sympathetic to the views of marginalised groups or activists and/or learn from their demands (Brown & Tregidga, 2017, p. 10). Theoretical and engagement strategies are required that recognise people “as both active agents and produced beings” (Brown et al., 2015, p. 633) and that promote reflexivity and change through exposure to divergent discourses and alliance building.

Thus CDAA scholars call for a politicised approach to microfinance aimed at promoting the accountability of dominant powerholders to subordinate groups (Tanima et al., 2020). The potential for activists and critical academics to work together with poor women (and sympathetic powerholders) to expose the dark side of microfinance and develop more enabling development programs is emphasised. Grassroots participation is aimed at awareness-raising and collective action. This includes organising collectively to hold powerholders to account for their legal and/or voluntary policy commitments to marginalised groups, regarding specific services and wider socio-economic structures.

In summary, while we draw on Dillard and Vinnari’s (2019) proposals for accountability-based accounting by working with salient groups in a responsibility network, we move away from a focus on organisational reporting in critiquing and re-thinking microfinance programs from the perspective of women’s empowerment. Our exploration of participatory fieldwork as a form of CDAA praxis also raised methodological issues which Dillard and Vinnari (2019) do not address. We elaborate on these next and present the modified CDAA framework we used to inform our fieldwork and data analysis.

3. Research setting, participants and methods

Microfinance as a neoliberal development strategy has been spearheaded by powerful organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund since the 1980s (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Castro, 2012). This brought major changes to the NGO sector in Bangladesh, which previously focused more on GAD principles of awareness-raising and social mobilisation in microfinance and other development programmes (ibid.). Neoliberalisation resulted in a shift of emphasis to financial sustainability, with international financiers playing a key role in homogenising the NGO sector around microfinance programs focused on developing “rational economic women”, rather than “empowered citizens” (Tanima et al., 2020).⁹ Our case study site, ISDE, has been significantly impacted by these changes.

ISDE was established in 1992 by social activists seeking to raise awareness and alleviate poverty among poor Bangladeshis,

⁹ More detailed discussion of how this global context affects local NGOs is provided in Section 4.

especially women. In its policy statements, ISDE represents microfinance as a key strategy for addressing economic disempowerment and advocates approaching development in an integrated way, with gender equality a core focus:

ISDE seeks to uproot gender specific discrimination within the society [by promoting] equal participation in family and social decision-making processes (ibid., p. 4).

The gender equality program is run by the Chittagong Social Development Forum, a network of NGOs based in Chittagong and headed by ISDE. The Canadian International Development Agency funded this program from 1998 to 2012, and it is currently funded by DoPeace.org, a United States-based NGO. This program was organised within the Chakaria municipality and Chittagong City Corporation wards around the theme of “social volunteers for social change” (ISDE information profile, p. 21). The program’s focus is on developing and organising “gender friendly” social entrepreneurs, volunteers, social workers and gender change activists to campaign against violence against women and child marriages, and to build pathways for women to be elected to local bodies. Our prior research indicated tensions between ISDE’s microfinance operations, based on neoliberal views of women’s empowerment as “financial inclusion” and cultivating “rational economic women”, and its wider awareness-raising work which resonated with GAD views of women’s empowerment rooted in power and politics. The GM/NFE program afforded the opportunity to explore these tensions in more depth, with the aim of promoting critical reflection on microfinance.

Following [Brown and Dillard \(2013b\)](#), we sought to engage counter-hegemonic perspectives and challenge power structures, rather than adopting a consensus-oriented approach. Through both academic analysis and practice-based interventions, our aim was to promote CDAA praxis that encouraged multidirectional learning across ISDE management, women borrowers, activists and academics. As well as addressing neoliberal power structures at the global level, this included being alert to the power dynamics among different participants in our study – for example, in terms of class, organisational hierarchies, educational and ethnic backgrounds. This enabled us to approach the idea of a responsibility network not as a homogenous group, but as interested constituencies with diverse insights into the impacts of neoliberal microfinance programmes and how they might be critiqued and/or transformed. For example, while subordinate groups are experts on their lived experiences, critical academics offer access to ways of representing issues that enable those at the sharp end of neoliberalism to (re)articulate their struggles as public (accountability) problems rather than as individual misfortunes ([Molisa et al., 2012](#)). Similarly, activists and social movements play important roles in supporting less powerful groups to organise politically to hold dominant powerholders to account ([Brown & Dillard, 2013a](#); [Cooper & Lapsley, 2021](#)).

The first author, from a middle-class Bangladeshi/Western background, carried out the fieldwork. ISDE granted access in October 2017, and the fieldwork occurred in January-February 2018¹⁰ comprising: 30 semi-structured interviews, five group discussion sessions, and analysis of ISDE’s policy documents and related reports.¹¹ The interviews and discussion groups were held in Chittagong city. ISDE’s executive director and branch manager (as the main representatives of the discontinued microfinance operation), and representatives from the GM/NFE program were interviewed. The latter group included women with loans from other MFIs and their husbands,¹² gender change activists and program volunteers. The women borrowers used ISDE’s GM/NFE program as a “safe space” to seek assistance, including aid for natural disasters, attending discussion sessions with social workers (e.g. on domestic violence), and free education for their children. The gender change activists were members of the Chittagong Social Development Forum, the NGO network led by ISDE. The volunteers worked for ISDE as teachers and/or were local leaders and were the main contacts for the GM/NFE program. With ISDE’s support, we utilised this “safe space” for the purposes of bringing a responsibility network together.

ISDE’s Chittagong branch manager arranged the first few interviews. Once these initial interviews were conducted, through further field visits and ongoing discussions, the researcher developed her own contacts and organised sessions on her own. This not only reduced her reliance on ISDE as a powerholder (e.g. their ability to select interviewees or influence discussion topics), but also enabled her to observe first-hand aspects of the research participants’ lived realities. A generic interview guide was developed prior to the fieldwork and adapted as the research progressed and for different interviewees based on their backgrounds and roles (see Appendix 1). Interviews averaged 40 minutes and were recorded, transcribed and translated, resulting in 455 pages of text.

The interviews with women borrowers and their husbands were conducted in the women’s localities,¹³ in ISDE’s GM/NFE centres. A few interviews with women, women and their husbands, and program volunteers were group interviews, to enable multifaceted discussions about the challenges women face. The interviews with gender change activists and microfinance representatives were held in ISDE’s head office.¹⁴ Also, informal visits to the neighbourhood centres provided the researcher insights into the women’s living conditions, and the everyday struggles of urban life for the poor.

Five discussion sessions were held over January-February 2018, designed to bring different groups together. The first session was held with four women representatives and one husband, and involved an informal discussion of problems surrounding microfinance practices, and challenges of urban life for the poor. The other four sessions were arranged as follows: two in separate localities with

¹⁰ We had access to an earlier version of [Dillard and Vinnari \(2019\)](#), enabling us to build on their work.

¹¹ These included ISDE’s information profile, microfinance training manual and two GM/NFE reports.

¹² Not all husbands were willing to participate in interviews or group discussions, and many were unable to attend due to their day-jobs. This was a mixed blessing as women often appeared to speak more freely and were more critical of patriarchal norms when their husbands were not present.

¹³ ISDE has six GM/NFE centres in various locations. We selected two – in Jhoutala and Roufabad – as there is a concentration of MFIs in these areas, increasing opportunities for engaging with women with loans.

¹⁴ Two interviews with gender change activists were held at their homes. Given their busy schedules, it was not possible for them to visit the head office for interviews.

women representatives and volunteers (six participants in each); one with gender change activists and microfinance representatives (four participants); and one with women representatives and their husbands (six participants). These sessions commenced with open-ended questions on issues such as women’s empowerment, sexual harassment, domestic violence and microfinance, with the researcher showing short videos and images to stimulate discussions. Extensive field notes were taken describing the researcher’s observations and reflections – including details of activities, summaries of group discussions, personal observations, surprises encountered, and overall feelings regarding the fieldwork.

Drawing on Dillard and Vinnari’s (2019) proposals for responsibility networks, we developed a modified version of their framework. Our application is distinctive in four ways. Firstly, it incorporates a role for academics working together with marginalised groups, activists and social movements – in this study poor women and gender change activists – to support their accountability struggles. Secondly, it highlights the importance of engaging competing discourses; in our research setting the dominant neoliberal discourse of microfinance minimalism and counter-hegemonic GAD perspective. This provided a basis for critically analysing the broader context, understanding the influence of global development agencies on local MFI practices, scrutinising and enriching discussions that unfolded in the field, and identifying conditions of possibility for change. Thirdly, our application moves away from depoliticised, organisation-centric reporting, focusing instead on co-constructing counter-narratives of microfinance based on the lived experiences of marginalised groups. Fourthly, we addressed power relations in terms of both broad neoliberal power structures as well as power dynamics within our responsibility network.

As summarised in Fig. 2, we sought to engage competing discourses and assess their influence in the local ISDE context. We investigated the role the dominant neoliberal discourse of microfinance minimalism has played in shaping the broader context of NGO homogenisation and, in turn, ISDE’s practices and perspectives. Together with our research participants, we also co-investigated the impacts of neoliberalism on the lived experiences of women and their husbands, as well as gender change activists’ views regarding microfinance minimalism. As part of a responsibility network concerned about the harms of neoliberal development, this involved co-constructing counter-narratives of vicious cycles of disempowerment and identifying conditions of possibility for change. We also sought to actively intervene in the power dynamics at play between discourses and lived realities (e.g. by exposing participants to divergent views on women’s empowerment and encouraging them to reflect on their individual situations in systemic terms). The arrows in Fig. 2 are deliberately multi-directional in our ongoing attempts to challenge dominant neoliberal approaches to development (and, specifically, microfinance programs), present GAD-based alternatives and form alliances with those seeking change.

Data analysis focused on participants’ views of the problems, challenges and conditions of possibility associated with microfinance and women’s empowerment programs. The authors read the interview transcripts and field notes several times, identifying and

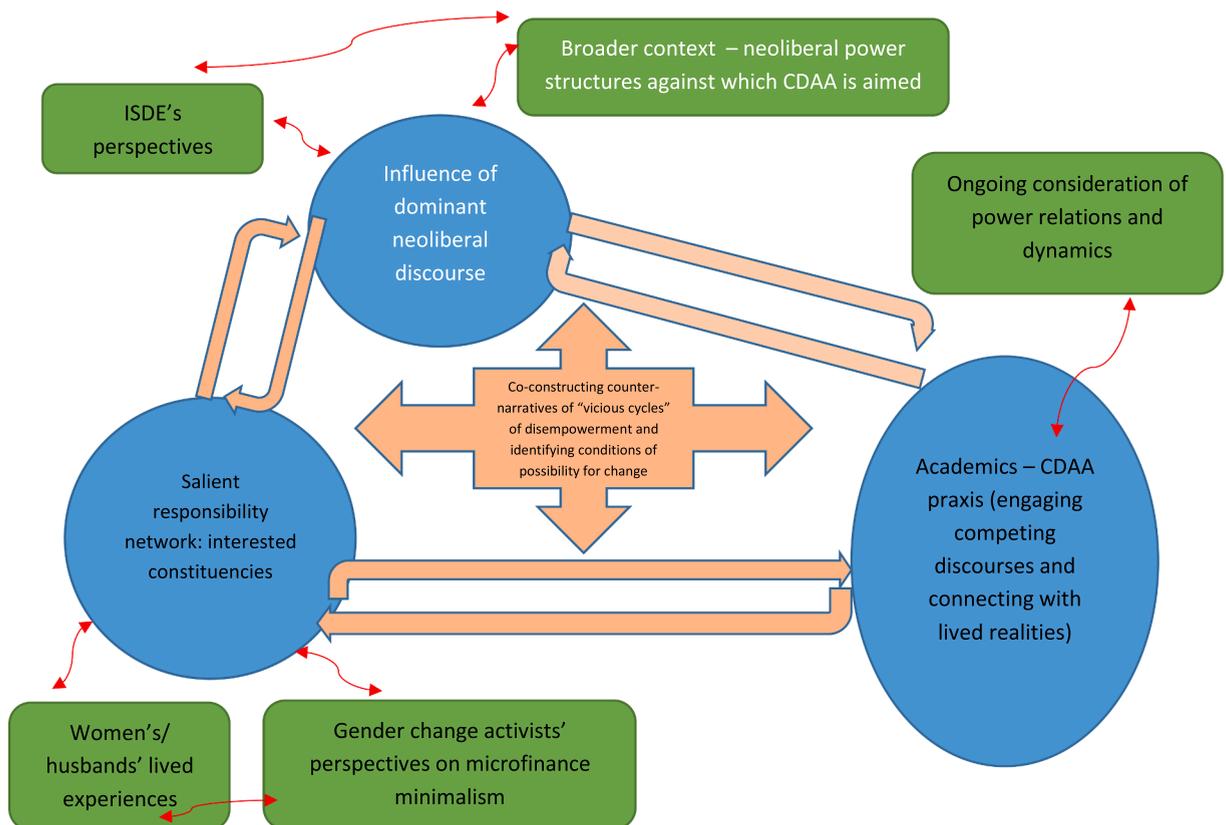


Fig. 2. CDAA praxis – as applied to microfinance and women’s empowerment.

discussing patterns and differences. Information from the interviews and group discussions was also summarised, including constructing counter-narratives of women's and their husbands' experiences with the dark side of microfinance often ignored or glossed over by development institutions (see Appendix 2 for an example). Emergent themes were recorded and analysed using the following codes: accountability and participation in microfinance programs, challenges of advancing women's empowerment in neoliberal contexts, impacts of microfinance on women's lives, possible changes to microfinance programs and the need to mobilise collectively for change. These provided a basis to reflect on participants' perceptions of the problems, challenges and conditions of possibility associated with microfinance programs, and to analyse them employing the neoliberal-GAD political frontier presented in Tanima et al. (2020) which counterposes the "neoliberal discourse of microfinance minimalism, which claims to empower women through 'financial inclusion'" with the counter-hegemonic GAD discourse "which (re)signifies empowerment as a 'citizen project'" (pp. 1–2). This "surfacing of the political" helped reveal the conflicting ideological orientations of policy documents, ISDE staff, women borrowers and their husbands, and gender change activists, and contradictions between policies and practices. The results of the analysis were then organised using the framework in Fig. 2 and are presented below.

4. Taking CDAA into the field: Microfinance minimalism and women's (dis)empowerment

We start by examining the neoliberalisation of microfinance in Bangladesh to illustrate the larger political forces at play in our research setting and then consider microfinance and women's empowerment from ISDE's perspective, including the struggles they face as a small-scale NGO. We then turn to the lived experiences of women borrowers and their husbands, GM/NFE program volunteers and gender change activists with microfinance minimalism, revealing a picture of "vicious cycles" of disempowerment, which contrast starkly with the "virtuous spirals" emphasised in neoliberal discourse. Based on discussions with our responsibility network, we then examine conditions of possibility for developing more enabling microfinance programs and provide some reflections on our experiences as researchers in taking CDAA into the field.

4.1. The neoliberalisation of microfinance in Bangladesh

The microfinance story in Bangladesh starts in the 1970s, when the country was recovering from an independence war with Pakistan. Shocked at the resulting poverty and human suffering, Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi who completed his PhD and worked as an academic in the United States, experimented with microcredit directed towards the poor, particularly women (Bateman, 2010, p. 7). He sought to develop an alternative to the informal financing model operated by rich local moneylenders and traders, who charged usurious interest rates (ibid.) and seized land owned by the poor if they defaulted on loan repayments, helping them become powerful local landowners (Bateman, 2010; Paprocki, 2017). On his visits to villages, Yunus observed that almost all the poor women were engaged in small-scale income-generating activities, and considered their lives could improve drastically through access to microfinance (ibid., p. 8).

The Grameen Bank was formally established by Yunus in 1983 (Karim, 2011). Its mission was to provide microcredit to the poor at affordable interest rates, with loans used for income-generating purposes (ibid.). Thus the poor started to be viewed as "bankable" (Bateman, 2010; Karim, 2011; Weber, 2016). This idea quickly spread with the emergence of organisations such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Bank Rakyat Indonesia and PRODEM, Bolivia. In addition to microcredit, new services (e.g. micro-insurance, micro-savings) were provided, resulting in the now generic term, microfinance (Shakya & Rankin, 2008). Most MFIs were established as NGOs, often with non-profit status. A key focus of the Grameen model was to maintain affordable interest rates to alleviate poverty and curb exploitive moneylending practices (Bateman, 2010; Paprocki, 2017). Although financial self-sufficiency was an integral component of this model, it became evident this was impossible without external financial support. The Grameen Bank, for example, has received government and international donor funds since its establishment (Bateman, 2010).

Following the independence war, many better known NGOs in Bangladesh, such as BRAC, Proshikha, ASA and Nijera Kori (the exception is Grameen Bank) began with the goal of undertaking structural analysis of inequality and poverty (Kabeer et al., 2012). They were strongly influenced by Paulo Freire's work on "conscientisation" and sought to combine this "with the organization and mobilization of the poor as the keystone of organizational strategies to bring about change" (ibid., p. 2046). They relied on funds from external organisations that shared their vision to undertake a range of activities (alongside microfinance) aimed at fighting poverty by politically empowering the poor. The diversity of funding sources available, including from like-minded donors, allowed these NGOs a degree of autonomy in determining their visions and strategies (ibid.).

However, with the growing influence of neoliberal ideas at the global level led by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the NGO sector underwent several changes in the 1980s (Kabeer et al., 2012). The informal sector was increasingly treated as the instrument through which local economic development and poverty reduction could be achieved (Bateman, 2017). Microfinance was seen as a way of providing the poor with the capital they needed to become microentrepreneurs and "trade themselves out of poverty", thus also advancing neoliberalism (Weber, 2004, p. 196).

The focus shifted from politically empowering the poor to ensuring large-scale outreach and profit maximisation through charging commercial interest rates on loans (Bateman, 2010; Bateman, 2017; Roy, 2010). This led to MFIs increasing the number of clients, to spread their fixed costs across a large number of microloans (ibid.). Commercial bodies started offering microfinance services and in

1995, the World Bank established the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP), an in-house body to steer international development policies towards microfinance (Bateman, 2017, p. 27). This included developing a rule book codifying the commercial microfinance model, known as the “Pink Book” (Bateman, 2017; Roy, 2010; Weber, 2016).¹⁵

With such developments globally, Grameen Bank transformed into a profit-driven financial institution, charging market interest rates and requiring savings accounts (Bateman, 2010; Roy, 2010).¹⁶ Neoliberal policies at the global level manifested at the local level in Bangladesh through donor funding becoming increasingly concentrated in a small group of large NGOs (Kabeer et al., 2012). The practice of favouring larger NGOs reflected pressures on donors “to scale up successful development operations, reduce burdensome transaction costs, decrease NGO reliance on donor money and initiate a process that would ensure financial sustainability” (Devine cited in Kabeer et al., 2012, p. 204). Donor concerns with financial sustainability, in turn, led to NGOs increasingly focusing on microfinance services, reducing their social service provision and abandoning efforts to politically empower the poor (Kabeer et al., 2012; Karim, 2011).

This deliberate process of homogenising the NGO sector around microfinance led to the collapse of several social justice-oriented NGOs, due to internal governance failures and weak financial systems unable to cope with the sudden insertion of large sums of money (Kabeer et al., 2012). Many donor-dependent NGOs had to abandon their earlier conscientisation model and adopt the microcredit model, which characterised poor women as natural, bankable entrepreneurs, and prioritised fiscal responsibility and loan collection over the political empowerment of the poor (Karim, 2011). This shift in focus fostered a corporate culture within NGOs. NGOs started focusing on “creditworthy” rural women and appointed staff who could maintain financial records and ensure fiscal discipline (ibid.). This “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” model sought to cultivate “rational economic women” who could compete effectively in market relations (Neff, 1996; Rankin, 2001).

4.2. From ISDE's perspective: operating in a context of neoliberal constraints

ISDE is a rights-based NGO with commitments to women’s economic, social and political empowerment, as articulated in its policy documents and when discussing its work with the Chittagong Social Development Forum. As the Executive Director explained, ISDE works with gender change activists and GM/NFE volunteers to integrate gender rights awareness in various projects:

Our main objective is to create awareness on gender issues, not only among women but also the people surrounding them. Women must first know their rights and the types of abuses that happen so they can protect themselves. So we work to raise this awareness as well as to protect and support the victims of abuse legally, emotionally etc... We have different projects like water sanitation, primary health care etc. Whatever the project is, we always emphasise women.

Simultaneously, consistent with GAD studies on the transformation of the NGO sector in Bangladesh from a “conscientisation model” to a neoliberal “market model” (Karim, 2011), ISDE also emphasised several factors that significantly constrain its ability to deliver on its commitments to women’s empowerment. In particular, ISDE struggles to attract and maintain funding, faces pressures to revise and conduct its operations according to donor requirements and has limited staff resources. While ISDE was initially supported by agencies such as the Bangladesh Bank, Action Aid Bangladesh, Proshikha and Population Concern, funding has dwindled and eventually stopped. Accordingly, women finance their own loans through high interest rates, and compulsory savings, as opposed to subsidies. As the Executive Director elaborated, when explaining why ISDE discontinued its microfinance operations in Chittagong and other areas:

For microfinance, the loan capital needs to keep increasing... Suppose in one year we sanctioned 100 crores to beneficiaries. Next year, due to increase in demand we must disburse 200 crores. But in our case... we couldn’t maintain the flow of funding. Other NGOs continue by lending from banks. Let’s say if we do that over 5 years and accrue outstanding loans of 50 lac taka, demand by then would have risen to 1 crore taka. A communication gap arose between our borrowers and us. As a result, we had to shut down our operations in many areas.

Even if we make plans they can’t be executed... because we are a recipient country. It depends on the donor end. Our plans, most of the time depend on the donor. Once upon a time for microcredit, we used to receive funds from donors. Then they stopped it.

The Chittagong Branch Manager (CBM) advised that ISDE faces “tremendous competition from bigger NGOs, such as BRAC”, which are preferred by donors on the grounds they have “stronger infrastructure”. Similarly, with the GM/NFE program, “the [Canadian] funding eventually went to BRAC” (CBM), leading to reduced activities. Hence, ISDE’s programs and their scope constantly evolve as the donors are rarely fixed. In particular, as GAD scholars emphasise (e.g. Kabeer et al., 2012), the neoliberalisation of microfinance locally and globally means there is minimal funding available for activities aimed at empowering the poor through grassroots political

¹⁵ See Roy (2010) for detailed discussion on the CGAP’s role in embedding commercial systems into MFIs.

¹⁶ As Bateman (2010, p. 18) observes, with “savings deposits attracting an average 9 per cent of interest and microloans provided at the advertised rate of 20 per cent, the margins achieved by recycling savings in this way were very healthy indeed”, helping explain why “Grameen clients soon began to come under pressure to continually ‘top up’ their microloan, irrespective of whether they needed the cash or not”.

action.

ISDE initially promoted awareness-raising and collective action, like many Bangladesh NGOs. However, under neoliberalism and associated donor and regulatory requirements, it has shifted its focus to financial sustainability and evaluating women's empowerment in individualistic terms (i.e. the "rational economic woman" pulling herself up by her bootstraps). A core requirement from donors is a focus on "outputs" related to loan disbursements and repayments. As stated in ISDE's information profile (p. 10), a computerised management information system (MIS) is key to achieving its organisational goals with respect to financial sustainability; enabling "governing at a distance" (Alawattage & Azure, 2021) that provides internal management control as well as upward accountability to donors and State regulators. As the Executive Director elaborates:

The MIS is data centric software. It tells me whether [ISDE] is meeting its target. For example, if I target to give loans to 500 people but give it to 400, the MIS will tell me I am short of my target by 100. This way, MIS can help me achieve my goals... [Similarly] if 500 people were supposed to pay their instalments today, but only 490 paid, the MIS keeps a record of this.

In line with industry standards of microfinance minimalism, ISDE's performance evaluation system is dominated by economic performance indicators, targeted at the organisation's financial stability. Loan defaults is the primary performance measure for fieldworkers, who are held accountable for borrowers' failure to meet repayment obligations. The objective is to identify women with the capacity to repay loans, with an implicit assumption that ensuring ISDE's financial sustainability automatically fosters women's empowerment. The CBM advises the need for "sticking to industry standards", coupled with "competition from other, particularly bigger, more established MFIs" means ISDE is not necessarily free to pursue the awareness-raising activities outlined in its policies. He claimed ISDE would "lose clients to competitors" if it challenged "industry-oriented microfinance practices":

There are over 1,000 NGOs here. Every NGO looks for clients and tries to secure her/him as loan-takers. There was a time when clients used to look for NGOs; the situation has changed now... Big NGOs don't keep their money idle. They take money from bank and invest it. It has become a business. I used to work in Shokti Foundation... We used to consult clients before providing loans and give them time every day. None of the NGOs work like this anymore. People are also not interested in these things anymore. They only focus on the money. The main problem here is competition.

These comments echo GAD concerns on how neoliberalism conditions what are, or can be, regarded as core issues in women's empowerment as MFIs increasingly become understood narrowly as "financial intermediaries".

ISDE uses its MIS for all projects, to keep track of "outputs". For education programs, for example, ISDE tracks the "number of educational tools in use" and for healthcare programs, "the number of people receiving medications and treatment" (ED). The focus of the MIS, as required by funders and regulators, is on outputs that are specific, measurable and time-bound. Besides the ED, there are only two other staff members at ISDE's head office in Chittagong – the account manager, who handles the financial accounts and reporting, and the Chittagong Branch Manager (CBM) who gathers data on various projects and branches, and prepares program reports. While the financial accounts document the results of the MIS through conventional reports such as the income statement and balance sheet, the program reports detail items such as project objectives, expected results, indicators of success, progress on project activities, and results. These are all primarily discussed in terms of the *numbers* of activities undertaken, with no attempt to undertake any impact assessment in terms of women's empowerment – of microfinance or other programs.¹⁷ Similarly, there is no attempt to provide accountability to, or incorporate the views of, the poor women who are supposed to be the primary beneficiaries of these programs.

4.3. Views from "below": women, husbands, volunteers and gender change activists

The women, husbands, volunteers and gender change activists raised several issues challenging neoliberal claims that programs based on microfinance minimalism empower women. A major issue was MFI's lack of engagement with women's interests, concerns and struggles. Many women reported they felt unfairly treated or exploited. The following quotes are representative of the instrumental approach and lack of empathy, dignity and respect they described in their interactions with MFIs:

They just come every week and tell us how much loan is outstanding at present. (WR1)

A year ago, I was in hospital. We planned that after returning home I will pay the loan from my savings. With that money we would start a shop and my husband will look after it. From the income, I will make repayments and run the family. But all my hope was in vain, as they fired me as soon as I return from hospital as I missed two repayments... No special attention was given to the fact I lost my baby during childbirth. So my husband is still a rickshaw puller; I do not have enough money, nor can anyone give me 10,000 taka to start the shop. I am in deep trouble now. I cannot properly manage my family with his earning.

¹⁷ Examples of the results reported from the GM/NFE project include: a one-day orientation course on volunteers' roles and responsibilities; development of 10 area resource profiles; and a one-day orientation course for 10 gender change activists.

My younger son needs medicine each week that cost 600 to 700 taka and he has to see the doctor very often. He was born prematurely at 7 months... So I am in misery now. (WR11)

Women also raised concerns about the lack of consultation with them over MFI's lending or women's empowerment policies. They saw a need for MFIs to "consult" with them about "revising/bringing changes to the program" (WR10). They believed that discussions with MFI representatives would help them explain the pressures of increased interest rates. They also highlighted how little guidance they received from MFIs on investing loans, suggesting that since MFIs expected women to invest funds in business ventures, they should provide more assistance:

If someone could advise, for example, how to use microcredit to start a business. Let's say I buy cloth for 200 taka and sell it for 250 taka.... However, while paying instalments, I am unable to do this since I have little left at the end of each week. If I could get some money via microcredit for myself, I could be self-sufficient. (WR3)

The following quote from a husband, provides further insights into the struggles poor people face operating within an informal economy that puts the onus on individuals to exercise restraint, innovation and creativity to pull themselves out of poverty:

Microfinance is good for those who can profit from it. But those who cannot make profit or use it correctly, it is not the best solution... For example I took loan of 20,000 taka and then did not go to work for 10 days. I gave the excuse I was not feeling well. In those 10 days I spent 10,000 taka in shopping, eating good meals and made myself happy. I enjoyed that time. After 10 days, I got tensed thinking how to pay the instalment; my wife will be in trouble. So the loan aspect is beneficial, but you have to use it properly. (H5)

Reflecting on her own struggles, WR2 emphasised that women are not a homogenous group. Rather than adopting a "one size fits all" approach, she argued MFIs need to pay more attention to women's diverse circumstances; for example by providing additional financial and legal support for divorced women:

I'd like MFIs to address the extra attention divorced women may need. For example, my husband is not looking after me. He forgot about me and my son, now he has married again. But isn't my son his son too? Doesn't he have some responsibilities? We struggle a lot. Yes, if they could provide some assistance and I could get legal shelter....

Regarding heterogeneity, and how women's rights, needs and interests are best supported, program volunteers also pointed to differences in levels of financial awareness and conflicts that arise within borrower groups regarding loan repayments:

Some people take loans but when it comes to repayment say they don't know the terms and conditions. Then it becomes a mental torture for them. (WV1)

...there are some bad natured women too. Here we have blacklisted five to six of them. They take loans from different [MFIs]. Then when it's time to repay they can hardly manage to repay and go into hiding... They are poorer hence their desperation is more. (WV2)

As indicated above, the system of microfinance minimalism underpinning "rational economic women" and the operation of borrower groups pits women against each other, rather than fostering "empowered citizenship". Furthermore, women's heterogeneity as manifested in loan use (e.g. for "appropriate" business investments or "inappropriate" personal expenditures), adds to tensions among women in the local community:

A lot... take the loan by lying. They hide information. They may say they will start a business with the loan but they don't. Rather they will do something... like buying a television. Maybe previously they didn't have a television, their children probably nagged for it, so they took loan and bought it. But the TV is not generating any income... So, the family needs to put extra effort into saving by cutting down their expenses to repay the loan. (WR2)

Given patriarchal cultural norms, husbands' social positioning as the "primary breadwinners" in Bangladesh exacerbates women's disadvantage relative to men. As reflected in the paternalistic quotes below, husbands generally see women as properly subordinate to men, and expect women to "listen" to them, preferably not work, "depend" on them for income and "take care" of them:

[Women] are extremely busy with household work. I have never let my daughter or wife go outside! It looks odd when women are outside.... People will say he is living on his wife's income or daughter's income. I have worked hard all my life to support my family. I don't want people to talk ill about us. That's why, I don't let my family members socialize much outside home. We are happy with what we have in our house! The right role for women is to help maintain the household. (H1)

Household income needs to be good. If the family isn't earning enough, problems start arising. For example, over the years, my income has decreased. That's why I'm in a position where I have to take financial help from my wife; this was never the case before. (H2)

I married my wife. Now she is my responsibility. It is her right to get provided by me. It is my duty to give her what she needs. (H3)

I never depend on her knitting business. I never interfere in her affairs. I remind her I left my family for her. I wanted her to be established, to have an empowered life... She obviously does not have to work once we are more solvent financially. She should only take care of our children. I would provide every facility and give her all the support she needs. I urged her not to do anything that can break my ego. I want my parents to respect her. (H4)

While the discourse of microfinance minimalism presents women's access to loans as empowerment through "financial inclusion", with images of rational economic women – as earning, working and self-reliant – the quotes above suggest a very different picture. Husbands usually see women's roles outside domestic thresholds as "unnatural", and only necessary when household incomes are not at an "acceptable" level. Men's "fragile" egos, especially evident in the last quote, are something women are required to navigate around, to help ensure the "success" of microfinance minimalism.

Accordingly, as emphasised in GAD discourse, women remain entangled in patriarchal structures which go unchallenged by MFIs. The following quote from a husband is indicative of household power dynamics between poor women and their husbands in Bangladesh, and the domestic conflicts microfinance can generate:

I have been taking responsibility for my family since 1995. When I left my parent's house I didn't know anything other than studying. I had to... do petty things to run my family. The thing is, if I can't believe my wife I can't live with her and I had to suffer a lot for believing her. She took loan without informing me. When I found out... the stress was incredible to handle. I couldn't progress in my life because of this. I don't have any saving. If she informed me first or we took the decision mutually, maybe my life would have been different. There were days we had nothing to eat because we had to pay instalments. We had a lot of dispute over this... I scolded her a lot. To save her, I had to take another loan. I didn't have much cash. There are many problems in the loan system. If husband and wife take the decision together... it can become a successful venture. A wife has to understand it's her husband's duty to earn enough for his family. The husband will earn and handover the income to the wife so she can manage the household. My wife didn't have any income source. So when she took the loan without letting me know, I was in trouble. So our relation went through a lot of turmoil because of this loan. (H2)

The husband's position as the primary breadwinner is unquestionable in this account, and supposedly justifies why his wife should seek his permission before taking a loan. This patriarchal culture is reinforced by pressures women face from MFIs for repayments – directly, from loan officers, and indirectly through "peer pressure norms" from "other women members within the small group" (WR13). These various pressures combine to solidify the foundation of the "bankable" neoliberal subject whose sole responsibility is to return the loan money (Alawattage et al., 2019, p. 1).

The gender change activists were highly sceptical of claims by MFIs and development agencies that microfinance empowers women. Despite the presence of the Microcredit Regulatory Authority and best practice guidelines, they claimed lending practices were not regulated properly, particularly rules supposedly preventing women from taking loans from more than one MFI at a time. As the chair of the Roufabad community elaborated:

I will never agree [microfinance empowers women]... I have seen many women from the slums of this area taking microloans. Various organisations are giving 25–30,000 loans. After taking one loan from one organisation, they take another loan from a different organisation to pay that off. Then there is a committee leader who gets a percentage from each loan. So, due to these malpractices and unregulated loans, the families end up worse off than before. (GCA3)

Problems related to vicious cycles of spiralling debt, and associated increases in stress, fear and insecurity, were reinforced in the following quote from a husband:

I have seen many families get broken. People have to sell their assets to pay the loan. I have seen in many cases people get hooked up in loans. They keep taking loans to repay another. In this area, some people had to sell their houses..... So I think small loans are destructive.... I have suffered a lot. From the year I got married (1995) I have wasted so much money on loans I couldn't do anything in my life. I couldn't have any savings. So it's my personal opinion that it's bad. (H4)

The Chair of the Roufabad community detailed the struggles the landless urban poor face in establishing business projects in the slum areas they live in, leading many to use loans for consumption rather than development purposes:

In the slum areas, development from [microfinance] may not be possible. [Poor people] are living in slums built on encroached government land. When they borrow money through microfinance, they cannot do anything productive in these areas. Instead,

they use the money to decorate their rooms with new furniture, electronics etc. They eventually end up selling those as well to repay the loan. (GCA3)

Given the weak regulatory environment for MFIs in Bangladesh, women claimed they are highly susceptible to falling victim to fraudulent groups claiming to be MFIs or other predatory schemes. Based on their past experience, they lack confidence the legal system or other authorities will enforce their rights or claims:

We once attended a meeting and got betrayed! A... lot of big people came; including a big-shot business person. They requested us to save a portion from each day's budget... They told us about a five year plan where the amount submitted will be doubled. We asked them how the money will get doubled. They said they would invest our money and put the profit in the bank. After five years we would get our money back. We started depositing our hard earned money. They mentioned we can draw out loans too. Me and my sister-in-law took 5,000 taka each. The week we repaid that 5,000 taka and in total my deposit was over 16,000 taka, the committee ran away... with crores of money. We referred at least hundreds of people to them. A police case was filed but they fled the country with all the money, and got away! (Woman representative from GD1)

Like the microfinance borrowers in [Marini et al. \(2017\)](#) study, many participants felt they lacked any power to complain or hold anyone accountable:

This is why some people don't like to take loans. My husband doesn't even like me to talk with them, forget about loan. (Woman representative from GD1)

Gender change activists highlighted the resistance they face in confronting patriarchal structures and the perseverance required to achieve change:

My role... involved solving women's issues... sometimes by mutual agreement, sometimes by local hearings etc. This encouraged women to come to me. I tried to talk to husbands to make them understand. I was in the community policing team and... used to seek their help from time-to-time, if husbands refused to listen to me. I was also on good terms with some influential people within the area; so people couldn't intimidate me.

However, my brother-in-law and his family members didn't like what I was doing, and insisted my acts are shameful and not in line with what is expected of women. So he and his people started beating up locals who came to me with their problems. My husband also told me to stop counseling the locals because he heard complaints about me and this embarrassed him. He was worried our children/or me might be kidnapped. I didn't give up even after that.

Our area is extremely conservative. According to most, women just have two duties – managing household and entertaining husbands. They do not like the idea of women working outside home.... They cannot tolerate when we come out of our homes or raise our voice against violence. That does not mean I will stop my work....I shall continue (GCA6)

They also pointed to lack of funding for the activities they are involved in due to the current dominance of microfinance:

We try to support women in many different ways, and have programs focused on gender-based violence, human trafficking, education and awareness-raising initiatives; we work with sex workers and try to provide safe homes and legal aid for them... however, funding for these activities is really limited (GCA7).

In summary, engaging with the lived experiences of women, their husbands, volunteers and gender change activists brought various dark sides of microfinance to the fore; disempowering impacts too often ignored or glossed over in the official accounts of MFIs and development agencies. The vicious cycles of debt and negative chains of impact associated with microfinance minimalism are also illustrated in the counter-narrative included in Appendix 2. However, are there also conditions of possibility associated with microfinance programs? We examine this next.

4.4. Conditions of possibility for more enabling microfinance programs

In critiquing microfinance, GAD scholars have also pointed to conditions of possibility for developing more progressive approaches to microfinance ([Rankin, 2001, p. 13](#)), highlighting the importance of not merely conceiving of subordinate groups "in apolitical terms... as subjects without the capacity to struggle" ([Weber, 2014, p. 558](#)).

In line with CDAA, we understand "conditions of possibility" not only in terms of counter-hegemonic discourses (e.g. GAD), but also everyday actors "as knowledgeable, creative and, therefore, capable of effecting institutional reconfigurations" ([Uitermark, 2005, p. 148](#)). As [Ranasinghe and Wickramasinghe \(2021\)](#) demonstrate in the context of "postcolonial neoliberalism" in Sri Lanka, subaltern women find spaces "for resistance and emancipation" (p. 652). We similarly explore issues of agency through the voices of our research participants including their everyday acts of resistance against patriarchal norms and microfinance minimalism. This helps to show

that poor women (and their husbands) are not merely passive recipients of dominant discourses and offers an entry point for reflecting on broader collective actions to challenge microfinance minimalism and develop more enabling microfinance programs.

Prior GAD studies report that, contrary to the claims of most microfinance programs, women often do not use loans for income-generating purposes (Shakya & Rankin, 2008). While this can lead to tensions between women, as discussed above, women in this study shed light on these “transgressions” and prompted reflection on women’s agency. The women confirmed they often did not invest the funds in microenterprises, as required in loan contracts. Due to their weekly interactions, women build strong relations with loan officers, sometimes colluding with them to not disclose to upper-tier management how loans are used:

I used my first loan in renovating my shop; second one in renovating my house and last one in making jewellery. However, branch managers do not know about these. If they knew they would not authorise the loans. (WR5)

We have good relations with the loan officers as we meet every week. So, they would write ‘for businesses’ in the purpose section of the form.¹⁸ (WR14)

During one discussion session, women reported they shared a loan amongst themselves, but this was formally recorded in the MFI’s books as a loan to an individual member. Women also tended to defy traditional gender and religious norms through the use of microfinance loans:

My husband doesn’t like loans. He doesn’t want to pay the interest. He considers it *Haram* (forbidden in religion). So I took the loan without informing him. (WR2)

Because of established working relationships with women, loan officers often exercise flexibility regarding MFI rules:

I was renovating my house at the time and in hardship financially. I asked the officer to consider my situation. She cut the loan from my savings and approved another loan of 20,000 taka. With that money I completed my house renovations. (WR7)

Furthermore, while the idea of the male as the “head of the household” and “primary breadwinner” is deeply entrenched in Bangladesh, discussions with husbands revealed some evidence of less stereotypical family relations:

I can play *Tabla*.¹⁹ I play with *Qawwali*²⁰ groups. When I go, my wife runs the shop (MV1).

I cooked today. My wife was busy doing something; so I cooked. I felt lucky to share her work. (MV1).

As one women volunteer observed, through their exposure to awareness-raising sessions in ISDE’s GM/NFE program, while women are still overwhelmingly “stuck” within traditional patriarchal norms, they are in an ongoing process of challenging and (un)learning such traditions. This is captured in the quote below, where she reflects on women’s roles as active rather than passive/subordinate household members:

...in every family I see women’s empowerment more. Men are just earning but their duties end when they hand the money over. Then women decide where to spend, invest etc. Household management is mostly done by women. Decisions regarding kids too are taken by women – where to admit them, which tuition they go to etc. These are all decided by women. In this case men are lagging behind. Men can’t manage money well. They will spend the entire month’s expense in a fortnight. (WV2).

She also reflected on how her role as a GM/NFE program volunteer has influenced her husband to change his views about deep-seated societal norms:

He helps me a lot in household work. When he sees I am very busy, he cooks. In our house we don’t believe in [rigid gender roles]. We are earning together and sharing the household work together too. (WV2)

Furthermore, some husbands demonstrated understanding of various forms of violence women face in their everyday lives, and the need for awareness-raising and collective action not just among women but also local powerholders to combat this:

¹⁸ These close relations between loan officers and women do not necessarily benefit the women. As Marini et al. (2017, p. 1360) report, they also provide potential for fieldworkers to manipulate or exploit borrowers. As in other studies, women reported that loan officers sometimes pressured them to take large or additional loans, and that they sometimes shared loans with fieldworkers, or paid them extra commissions. Our earlier research also found fieldworkers sometimes “bend” rules to meet MFI performance targets related to client numbers and repayment rates.

¹⁹ A musical instrument like a small drum.

²⁰ A form of Sufi Islamic devotional music popular in the Punjab and Sindh regions of Pakistan.

There are so many types of violence against women. If I hurt my wife physically that's one kind of violence. Women are getting violated, sexually harassed everywhere – school, college, office, in roads. Those who work as maids in different households are often sexually violated. In our society inequality is very acute. For example in construction work a male labourer gets way more than a woman labourer. The way this male chauvinist society tries to demean women, this is also violence. To have a change, men have to change their mentality first. Leaders and elders of a society have to respect women. There should be campaigns about respecting women, eradicating the discrimination and paying equal wages. (Husband from GD4).

The above quotes point to conditions of possibility for developing microfinance programs and supporting transformative change, especially in light of ISDE's ongoing work with poor women and their families. Their focus on building community relations through the GM/NFE program promotes solidarity among women, women's abilities to resist organisational, gender and religious norms, and existing understandings among husbands about unjust social relations. Accordingly, as reported below, we worked with members of ISDE's GM/NFE program to co-evaluate the need for, and ways of developing, more enabling microfinance programs.

4.5. Co-evaluating microfinance minimalism and possible alternatives

To initiate discussions on microfinance minimalism and possible alternatives, the researcher facilitated group sessions by showing short YouTube video clips on women's empowerment and associated images (see Appendix 3). Discussions were conducted with women representatives and volunteers, gender change activists and microfinance representatives, and women representatives and husbands.

Bringing diverse groups into the sessions enabled consideration of women's experiences with microfinance, husbands' positions and the views of gender change activists with specific knowledge of the local situation. As academics we also engaged as part of the responsibility network in promoting critical reflection on microfinance minimalism, neoliberal development and the issues that need tackling to generate transformative changes. For example, while microfinance minimalism "works around" patriarchy in its approach to women's empowerment, the researcher posed questions concerning the need for microfinance programs to directly challenge patriarchal relations, in line with GAD perspectives.

Two main concerns emerged in the group discussions – issues regarding patriarchal relations and people's struggles with poverty. Regarding patriarchy, a key issue raised was the need for microfinance programs to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs about the "male primary breadwinner". Participants argued this portrays females as "burdens" and males as "assets", and subordinates females within household and societal structures:

If you do not have a son, people will talk behind your back and treat you with less respect. If we think about X... she can be a financial support for her family but if she got married, her husband might not allow her to support her mother financially.... (Respondent from GD2)

A husband, who is also a male volunteer in the GM/NFE program, illustrated the need for challenging traditional gender roles through his own household experiences:

That day my wife burnt her hands, so I... did the entire household work. I had no issues in doing this and was so happy to help my wife. Did I become low in the process of doing this? In Western nations, people are switching between traditional gender roles regularly.... no one cares. Then why should we care here? There shouldn't be any discrimination. (Respondent from GD3)

Regarding how household-level changes could be initiated, a women volunteer highlighted the potential for raising awareness about gender equality through innovative methods such as participatory theatre:

One plot was this – a man has returned from a garments factory; he is very tired and reached home before his wife. He finished cooking so that when the wife returns she can have some rest. Another plot showed the wife came home first and did all the work.... Another... that although the husband came home earlier he did not do any work; the wife came later and did all the household work and even despite that the husband was bickering with her. He was saying things like... 'you are not doing enough work' and 'my mother used to cook with homemade chili paste ... you cook with readymade chili powder but cannot finish early'... There were a few young people/women amongst us, while the play was being staged; we started discussing.... The first act where the husband did all the cooking is good; but the act where the husband imposed all the work on the woman and still shouted at her was of course bad. For this scenario, the husband did not give the wife any consideration whatsoever! (Respondent from GD2)

As evidenced in the quote above, this creative/entertaining process of demonstrating alternative household structures/gender relations can provoke discussions around patriarchal norms. This helps show what programs based on microfinance minimalism are missing, and the types of awareness-raising activities that could be incorporated. Prompted by this discussion, participants reflected further on problems with in-laws, domestic violence, sexual harassment and the lack of governmental support:

Mine was 'love marriage' ... it was not arranged... we eloped. Later my in-laws... demanded substantial amounts of dowry. This is a common practice, although it is illegal. Despite my parents following all the dictates, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law tortured me a lot; they even beat me from time-to-time. My husband did not work at that time and I was victim of violence because of it. My in-laws worked so hard to separate [me and my husband] and I had to work to run my family. I worked as domestic maid; my husband was ill for three years and could not work. There were days we did not have any food. (Respondent from GD3)

(Shyly) I also did this; I scolded my wife. I have few rules... my condition is she can go wherever she wants but first she has to manage her family. I prefer she keeps me informed before going somewhere; that she has done her work and is taking care of my needs. (Husband from GD4)

I also faced violence from my in-laws during property sharing. They did not want to give me the room I demanded; they attacked me on the road, slapped me and pulled my hair. My husband rescued me. I wanted to take legal steps but the arbiter committee told me not to. (Respondent from GD3)

They blame the girl for facing sexual harassment if she wears lipstick, wears a nice dress, or for looking pretty. If you go to police to file a case, they ask the victim whether she provoked the accusers; while we do everything possible to help out, and provide support through this network, police often scold us rather than filing a complaint; they do not take these types of cases seriously. (Respondent from GD2)

The above quotes highlight various forms of violence women face in their homes and neighbourhoods. The first three indicate the verbal and physical violence women may be subjected to not only from their husbands, but also in-laws, stemming from cultural norms that women are not breadwinners and are the husband's responsibility (e.g. women move into their in-laws' homes after marriage). Although illegal in Bangladesh, dowry is still commonly practiced and closely linked to the husband as breadwinner norm. Indeed, contrary to neoliberal discourse, participants in our study suggested microfinance may strengthen rather than weaken the dowry system, with many women using loans to pay for their daughters' dowries. Participants also highlighted the sexual harassment women face in public spaces. Victim-blaming is pervasive and both domestic and public violence against women is often treated dismissively.

Accordingly, participants discussed the importance of working with State agencies to enforce legal procedures to hold perpetrators accountable. However, a challenge here is that such initiatives are "not thought of as important" (GCA5) according to microfinance minimalism, and change would require inviting powerholders, such as donors, government officials, microfinance providers and regulators into co-evaluation processes (GCA1). Such an approach also presupposes powerholders will be responsive to poor women's claims and struggles, something several participants doubted based on their past experiences.

Those skeptical of relying on working co-operatively with powerholders and "making polite requests for change" (Brown et al., 2015, p. 636) saw links between women's empowerment and social activism as key to fostering democratic accountability and bringing change in Bangladeshi society. They claimed the interests of powerholders were routinely prioritised over those of the poor (cf Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2009, pp. 388-89); for example, in relation to land reforms or crimes against the poor. In keeping with GAD-based understandings, they saw social change as requiring interventions from both within and outside the system:

...there is no proper punishment, hence criminals have no fear about committing crimes. (Women representative from GD4)

We have to make the legal actions strong and work actively with the government, so [perpetrators] cannot do any harm to us during their stay in jail and after they get released. If this security is ensured, more protests and rallies can happen, and we can venture out in the streets more for the purposes of activism. This is key to ensuring a democratic society. (Respondent from GD2)

One gender change activist reflected on her work with government departments, legal aid agencies and police officers, emphasising the value of having powerful allies and institutional support, so women can develop their collective capabilities to address patriarchal structures, and the ways microfinance programmes might support this:

We connect women with the government, through provision of training from Department of Youth Development and Department of Women's Affairs. We wish for women to become self-reliant... Women get to learn of government services through such training... We connect them and follow up after training. Our network is very strong and countrywide... Women who are victims of violence or harassment come to us... There are many legal aid organizations such as Human Rights Commission and women lawyers association with whom we maintain active networks... I am also a female representative of community police... We had a case recently of domestic violence. A school teacher was brutally beaten. She is now separated from her husband. The great thing about the [Chittagong Forum] is that even when funding is not available, we continue to do our work to the best of our abilities. (GCA7)

Consistent with GAD discourse, participants stressed the need for MFIs and global development agencies to be more in touch with the lived realities of the poor, and develop programs informed by grassroots understandings. The following quotes capture participants' lived experiences of poverty and neoliberal development and point to the systemic exclusions, hardships and neglect they face:

We need money for the present and future of our children. I need 500 taka daily to support my family but I earn 200 taka only. I do not even know what kind of future I can ensure for my children. If there is scope for extra earning to fulfill my needs or if organisations that work on various sectors come to us it may change the situation for people like us; people who have zero or minimum education and little earning. When you constantly have to worry about money, you cannot pay attention to anything else or your hopes cannot rise. (Husband from GD4)

I constantly worry about whether I will be able to earn enough today for my family... for food, clothes and education. Moreover, there is illness every now and then. Therefore, it is not possible for us to fulfill everything within this income. People like us, the lower income group of society, do not have full capacity for development. (Husband from GD4)

I am going to talk about the problems in my society. We have problems regarding toilet/bathroom, drainage, dustbin, electricity, water. Although there are deep tube wells in places, we have to buy water from those. One jug of water costs 1 taka... The electricity was supposed to be free but we have to pay electricity bill. We have to pay to clean the toilet although it is provided by the government and the City Corporation is supposed to clean it. There is no maintenance from government; we employ cleaners and we pay them. The toilets have no roof; dirty water drips down on our heads when we are inside the toilets. Furthermore, the drainage system is poor. Dustbins are rarely cleaned. Dustbins remain overflowed with garbage and filth; our children pass it on the way to school, we walk by it on the way to market. It is very unhealthy and our children can fall ill. It spreads germs; it is a source of mosquitos that sits on our food. There are family problems; if one woman faces domestic violence, it is problem for us also. We cannot ignore it; on the other hand if we interrupt them they would say it is their business and we should not interfere. We do not have unity or any welfare committee in our community. (Women representative from GD3)

As various participants emphasised, the poor experience several accountability failures in terms of their economic conditions, policy and legal frameworks, health and education systems, local government services, employment opportunities and violence against women. As in O'Leary (2017, p. 7) study of microfinance, they "fight for their everyday existence"; with neoliberal reforms such as privatisation, labour deregulation and reductions in social services adding to their hardship and sense of desperation and making it more difficult for the poor to organise politically.

As GAD scholars observe, microfinance minimalism, via its disciplinary power, also "dampens or contains resistance to the implementation of neoliberal policies at local levels" (Weber, 2002, p. 541). This was evident in the contradictory positions gender change activists conveyed in discussions and their proposals for change. While most expressed cynicism about microfinance they simultaneously reinforced neoliberal subjectivities by framing poor women, themselves and their expertise in market terms. Their proposals primarily involved working with or around neoliberalism and microfinance in incremental ways, rather than demanding accountability, challenging power structures or mobilising collectively. They favoured an institutionalised (and rather paternalistic) approach to women's empowerment supported by microfinance regulatory authorities, focused on developing business skills and vocational training to ensure women could make productive use of loans:

It would be beneficial if gender change activists are invited into microfinance forums, to discuss economic factors (how to invest loan money), and strategic needs and concerns of women. There should also be a program where we can provide vocational education and training and monitor their activities. (GCA, Female from GD5).

We provide gender training, tailor training, training on handicrafts.... so women who seek loans from MFIs can use the loans effectively. There are two types of training. One is training related to poultry and the other is pisciculture... women who are housewives and could not even imagine becoming entrepreneurs, currently own ponds for pisciculture and are engaging in it successfully. Some women have vegetable gardens. I believe microfinance regulatory bodies should ensure that MFIs formally engage with NGOs like us as a matter of principle, and establish this at the broader, regulatory, institutional level. (GCA7)

I set up businesses with the help of an NGO for a group of 9–12 women, each receiving 12,000 taka. They set up beauty parlour, small businesses and shops. Their businesses were monitored to see how they were using the money. Everything was set up for them. All they had to do was to run their businesses. At the end of the month, if they could recover the initial 12,000 taka, they were promised a further 24,000 taka, provided they were running the business successfully. (GCA4)

This shows how neoliberal discourse can constrain people's thinking and understanding of the possibilities for change; such that they become focused on securing their position within, rather than challenging, dominant orders (Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2009).

A few gender change activists also reflected on the need for social and political empowerment, in line with GAD-like understandings aimed at accessing accountability, rights and resources through awareness-raising:

More political representation of women is required in bodies such as Chittagong City Corporation, who can then raise awareness around grassroot concerns with policymakers and strategists (Gender Change Activist, Male from GD5).

We need to take ‘equal rights’ as a concept more seriously... just believing in ‘equal rights’ is not enough. For example, I have a daughter and wife at home. If I restrict their movements, then I am violating their rights. This is very common in cultures with conservative mindsets. To come out of this, there needs to be gender-focused education... a big factor is lack of awareness (Gender Change Activist, Male from GD5).

One ISDE representative claimed microfinance clients would not be interested in participating in awareness-raising activities, as this is not an established MFI practice. However, gender change activists responded that women, and others, are likely to become interested, once they experience what such activities have to offer. One commented his involvement in this study had boosted his interest in attending further sessions:

I should add here that people change their perceptions over time. I joined this session today because I have some free time... this has exposed me to some alternatives and I was also able to share ideas from my own experiences.... I am interested in attending further sessions.... (Gender Change Activist, male from GD5)

More generally, the women, husbands, volunteers and gender change activists reported they valued the opportunity to share their struggles, concerns and ideas. They reported the group discussions, in particular, had provided them with new ways of thinking about themselves and their relations with powerholders – as citizens with rights rather than merely MFI “clients” or “beneficiaries”. From a CDAA perspective, the discussions thus helped promote their political subjectivities and enabled them to see there were alternatives to neoliberal development and microfinance minimalism; for example, that borrower groups could (and should) be about far more than the giving and taking of money.

4.6. CDAA praxis – researchers’ reflections

From an academic engagement perspective, the discussion spaces we facilitated enabled problematising microfinance minimalism drawing on GAD perspectives and participants’ lived experiences – for example, the need to challenge neoliberal market logics and patriarchal norms around the male primary breadwinner. Participants reflected on how more enabling microfinance programs could be developed and integrated within existing institutional structures (e.g. through participatory evaluation, awareness-raising, legal support for women). They emphasised the importance of MFIs and development agencies engaging with women’s lived realities, and bringing their voices into official accounts, but based on their prior experiences, many considered changes were unlikely to occur without social activism.

This research generated discussions and counter-narratives through engagement with a responsibility network – women, husbands, gender change activists and critical academics – within a relevant NGO (ISDE) space. This process involved identifying a responsibility network outside the entities from whom accountability is sought (which included, but went beyond ISDE). The space enabled women from different MFIs, linked through their interactions with ISDE’s GM/NFE program, to come together and discuss their shared struggles. Exposure to GAD perspectives on microfinance and women’s empowerment encouraged them to think critically about their situations. Discussions between women and husbands helped surface power relations and encouraged both groups to reflect on their embeddedness within hierarchical household and societal structures. The presence of gender change activists, with experience in awareness-raising, also enabled critical reflection on microfinance minimalism through GAD lenses.

As academics, we played a key role in bringing this responsibility network together and became part of it by, for example, using the neoliberal-GAD political frontier to identify areas for discussion, raise awareness of competing views of women’s empowerment and as a basis for analysing and reflecting on discussions. This helped surface various contradictions; notably, ISDE’s stated commitments to GAD strategies in policy documents (e.g. rights-based awareness-raising) alongside accountability structures based on neoliberal governmentality. While we consider ISDE part of the responsibility network, it is also a powerholder that should be held accountable for its stated commitments to women’s empowerment. Some participants felt ISDE’s awareness-raising efforts were largely tokenistic, albeit due to a lack of funding under neoliberalisation. The issue of tokenism also arises in relation to our research design as initiating this “account” would not have been possible without ISDE, as the (traditionally considered) “account provider”, and we were dependent on the “benevolence” of the “accounting entity” in this regard.²¹ Is ISDE willing to transform its microfinance practices and, in any case, should poor women have to rely on voluntarist approaches?

As discussed, ISDE is open to CDAA/GAD practices as evidenced, for example, by its willingness to continue engaging with us as critical academics, its work with gender change activists in its GM/NFE program and openness to bring women from other MFIs into discussions. In this regard, this engagement context is atypical as we tapped into ISDE’s discontinued microfinance space – a void – which made ISDE more open to critique of microfinance minimalism and exploring alternatives. ISDE’s own disillusionment with aspects of neoliberal development provided an entry point to engage with marginalised groups and establish a platform for holding powerholders to account. ISDE did not set the terms of the engagement by, for example, controlling discussion topics or who was invited to participate. Thus we worked *within* ISDE spaces rather than necessarily *with* ISDE. Nonetheless, participants’ current and past dealings with ISDE may well have muted their criticisms of ISDE and MFIs more generally. Also ISDE is certainly not the most dominant powerholder in this context. It is a local player, operating on neoliberal terms, set through global and local alliances (in particular, the

²¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

World Bank, Grameen Bank and the Microfinance Regulatory Authority).

ISDE's distinctive positioning within a broader global/local power structure gave us opportunities as academics to open microfinance up to critical scrutiny through women's lived experiences and GAD lenses. Nonetheless this still leaves the question of the purpose of giving or receiving accounts "if you have no power to change things?" (Cooper & Johnston, 2012, p. 625). Did our CDAA praxis make a difference? What changes were ISDE willing to commit to? A "meaningful consequence" (Dillard & Vinnari, 2019, p. 22) of our contextual analysis together with participants' counter-narratives has been foregrounding the neoliberal power structures at play in microfinance minimalism (from the global to local levels), their harmful impacts in terms of poor women's everyday lives and the ways that neoliberalism and patriarchal norms intersect to reinforce women's subordination. ISDE's engagement with our CDAA-based evaluation criteria – supporting a politicised approach to accounting aimed at holding dominant powerholders to account; the potential for critical academics and activists to work together with marginalised groups to raise awareness of the dark side of microfinance (e.g. in local communities, policymaking arenas and the civil society domain); and to propose alternatives to microfinance minimalism – are the longer-term processes set in motion.

This engagement has led to ISDE's willingness to participate in discussions with a social mobilisation organisation, Nijera Kori, known for its opposition to microfinance and hailed by GAD scholars for its advocacy of alternatives (Paprocki, 2017). Nijera Kori rejects the dominant neoliberal approach of NGOs in rural Bangladesh "in favor of conscientization and mobilization, in order to support the poor in realizing their own collective capabilities" (ibid., p. 266). As academics seeking to intervene in our research setting, we initiated these discussions with Nijera Kori, with the aim of strengthening our responsibility network (e.g. to make demands of powerholders) and our future engagements will assess the emancipatory potential of this collaboration.

In this study we worked with our responsibility network to develop counter-narratives foregrounding the dark side of microfinance minimalism often ignored or glossed over by development institutions (as illustrated in Appendix 2). These counter-narratives indicate the hopes, challenges and struggles of poor people in Bangladesh and the strength they exhibit on a daily basis to survive in conditions of extreme poverty and patriarchy. In future engagements, we propose to extend our responsibility network through the inclusion of Nijera Kori and scale up these activities (e.g. through more broad-based counter-accounting initiatives). Overall, the aim is to form political alliances with the "teeth" to challenge neoliberal ideas, values and practices and hold powerholders (MFIs, donors and global development agencies) to account for their stated commitments to eradicate poverty and promote women's empowerment. An important aspect is pursuing legally backed information and participation rights for marginalised groups and related advocacy groups, rather than relying on the "felt" accountability of powerholders.

Consistent with CDAA concepts of "conflicted selves", participants were often ambivalent in their evaluations of microfinance. For example, some women welcomed the new opportunities and financial independence from husbands microfinance had provided while also emphasising the fear, frustration and loss of dignity others experienced in struggling to repay loans. Women's heterogeneity was also apparent in terms of conflicts within peer groups; for example, resentment and blacklisting of women who "misused" or were unable to repay loans. Similarly, while some men described microfinance as "evil", and spoke of their discontent and broken aspirations, they also pointed to benefits (e.g. improving some families' financial situation) and how these might be enhanced. Gender change activists provided examples of projects that combined business training with GAD-based awareness-raising, while also stressing that microfinance diverts resources from more rights-based approaches to development. Ideological differences regarding how change is best achieved were also evident, with some favouring "polite requests" to powerholders and others arguing the need for more adversarial accountability strategies and activism. Are such ambivalences and conflicts problematic for forming responsibility networks?

From a CDAA perspective, acknowledging plurality is key to avoid "new forms of monologism" (Brown, 2009, p. 327). This includes resisting temptations to "rescue people from their 'false consciousness'" or guide them to pre-identified "right answers" (ibid.). Ensuring effective participatory processes involves addressing differences, enabling people to "speak on their own terms" and "engage in robust debate" (ibid., p. 333). Similarly, groups forming counter-hegemonic alliances are not homogenous and addressing intra-alliance tensions is key to ensuring change initiatives are not approached in overly monolithic or romantic ways. Agonistic engagement does not mean "anything goes", but is about recognising "the humanly constructed nature of institutions; taking responsibility individually and collectively for judgements and the worlds they produce; and being prepared to have our beliefs and actions (including inaction) interrogated by others" (Brown et al., 2015, p. 640).

A key issue in CDAA praxis is addressing power relations. In the case of microfinance, poor women are being subordinated through both neoliberal and patriarchal norms. This study is an attempt to initiate responsibility networks to counter such dominant forces through awareness-raising and alliance building (e.g. with Nijera Kori), with a view to increasing pressures on powerholders at various levels for better access to rights, resources and accountability. The researcher also constantly reflected on the power relations she brought into the setting. Her position as a researcher in the Western context, and educated, middle-class background in the Bangladesh context, meant she received special attention and importance within the responsibility network. Would a person embedded geographically within Bangladesh, and socially within a "lower" class, garner similar levels of interaction? As the gender change activists reflected, a key challenge they face is that their work is not necessarily "seen as important and respectful" given its "voluntary nature" (respondent from GD5). Often people assuming these roles are from lower-middle class backgrounds, and find it difficult to mobilise across class or patriarchal divisions. Furthermore, while not present in the field, the backgrounds of the other researchers as Western academics, and non-Bangladeshi, White individuals, within a historically colonised context, also helped in gaining access to ISDE and securing the engagement of participants.

In summary, this study empirically illustrates how CDAA praxis can support the accountability struggles of marginalised groups – in this case by working with(in) a sympathetic MFI together with poor women, husbands, volunteers and gender change activists – to form a responsibility network and provide a rich account of the problems, challenge and conditions of possibility associated with microfinance and women’s empowerment programmes. While forming this network was not without challenges nor free of power relations, CDAA praxis foregrounded poor women’s struggles with microfinance minimalism and provided a basis for wider engagements and alliances for change.

5. Discussion and concluding reflections

In this section we discuss the broader implications of our efforts to initiate, and actively engage as part of, a responsibility network in the politically contentious area of microfinance and women’s empowerment and provide some concluding reflections.

5.1. Confronting neoliberal power structures

In this paper, we demonstrate a workable notion of how dominant power structures can be confronted with counter-hegemonic perspectives at the field level. We started by examining what neoliberalism means for microfinance and (de)politicisation. This was key for understanding, and assessing the localised impacts of broader neoliberal dynamics and ideologies. This enabled us to contextualise discussions with ISDE, a localised NGO impacted by intersecting global and national neoliberal trends, resulting in the discontinuation of some of its microfinance operations. We conceptualise this process as a “confrontation” with neoliberal power structures. Previous CDAA studies have emphasised the importance of analysing neoliberal power structures that (re)produce monologic accounting and of developing alternatives (e.g. Brown et al., 2015; Brown & Tregidga, 2017; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019) but have not demonstrated what this means for CDAA praxis at the fieldwork level. While Tanima et al. (2020) present a framework articulating the key differences between GAD and neoliberal discourse in relation to microfinance minimalism, they do not initiate “on the ground” accountability struggles that might foster transformative changes.

Our process of confrontation is at an initial stage, based on engagement with one small NGO (ISDE) that has been negatively impacted by market competition from larger NGOs that are more neoliberally aligned. We have not yet opened discussions with other NGOs/MFIs or powerholders such as donors and regulators. However, ISDE’s distinctive positioning has enabled us to engage with a relatively “sympathetic” powerholder, access its broader networks and identify future engagement possibilities – for example, inviting a social mobilisation organisation opposed to microfinance to join our responsibility network.

While appreciating Dillard and Vinnari’s (2019) proposals for responsibility networks, we argued that, in relying on powerholders to prepare accounts based on new evaluation criteria, they have not moved far enough from organisation-centric reporting. While we agree conventional accounting providers should produce more democratically-responsive accountings, we remain concerned about the risks of co-option and tokenistic participation (Archel, Husillos, & Spence, 2011). Thus we base our approach on responsibility networks working with marginalised groups to produce counter-accounts that might have more political force, in line with the idea of “subaltern resistance as a form of emancipatory accounting” (Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2009, p. 379). The counter-narratives we co-created in this engagement exemplify “socially embedded practices of providing accounts”, which are “not necessarily calculable” or within “formal organisational parameters of reporting”, adding to the repertoire of “weapons of the weak” (ibid., p. 380). Our approach also aligns with Tregidga and Milne’s (2020, p. 1) calls to broaden and open up analyses of accountability relations “to contests over issues, rather than take organisation-centric foci” and in a way that “sheds light on conflict rather than shies away from it”. As in Lehman et al. (2016, p. 49) we sought to use the counter-narratives of marginalised groups to illuminate “the limits of neoliberal market logic, defy neoliberal discourse and reveal social impacts”.

Key learnings from this initial confrontation include the importance of contextualising neoliberalism in analysing field-level discussions, strategies and practices; of formulating counter-hegemonic evaluation criteria to promote critical reflection on dominant discourses (here those related to neoliberal development, microfinance minimalism and patriarchal relations); and identifying possibilities for transformative change. For example, we highlight how neoliberalism intersects with local patriarchal norms in suppressing women’s voices and the need for CDAA praxis aimed at awareness-raising and collective action. In doing so, we challenge the politics of micro-accountability, with its “single-minded preoccupation with ‘repayment rates’” (Kabeer, 2001, p. 83).

5.2. Engagement and networking

We see CDAA engagement as involving two iterative stages. The first stage involves bringing critics and marginalised groups at the sharp end of neoliberal development (here microfinance minimalism) together to articulate their concerns and envision alternatives. In this study we experimented with this on a mini-scale, forming a responsibility network with poor women, husbands, volunteers and gender change activists associated with a pertinent (and sympathetic) powerholder (ISDE). The focus was on enabling participants to surface, discuss and critically reflect on their own standpoints regarding microfinance and women’s (dis)empowerment and to start to build alliances for change. In recognition of the need for responsibility networks and accountability strategies with “teeth” (Fox, 2015), we intend to scale-up these engagements as part of our ongoing research program.

The second stage in CDA engagement, unexplored in this study, would involve these broader alliances – for example, between critical academics, marginalised groups, sympathetic NGOs and social movements – taking collective action to agonistically engage advocates of neoliberal development and microfinance minimalism. Counter-accounts that collated individual narratives (Appendix 2), together with macro-political analysis (Section 4.1), exemplify alternative accountings that could form the basis for agonistic engagement with pertinent powerholders;²² in this case, by making “polite requests” for change or formulating and presenting accountability demands to MFIs, government authorities, global development institutions (cf Brown et al., 2015, pp. 634-635).

Agonistic praxis is likely to encounter opposition from global to local powerholders supporting neoliberalism, and tensions within responsibility networks – for example, between differently subordinated groups (women from different ethnic or class backgrounds, women and their husbands), or between grassroots activists and sympathetic members of dominant elites who may join counter-hegemonic alliances. Does this mean academics should not engage on the ground? Are academics well-placed to initiate responsibility networks? From a CDA perspective, it is naïve to assume that academics have the power to challenge patriarchal and neoliberal ideas, values and practices on their own and through one-off engagements. However, how we navigate the challenges of agonistic praxis is key.

In this case, the researcher organised discussion groups only after conducting individual interviews, assessing context-specific possibilities and reflecting on power dynamics. The questions posed were informed by competing GAD-neoliberal perspectives on women’s empowerment and designed to prompt discussion around the problems, challenges and conditions of possibility regarding microfinance programs. Visual exercises helped draw attention to structural inequalities and enabled sharing of views about how to challenge and transform dominant norms. With the support of ISDE, the focus was on building a “safe space” for marginalised groups and gender change activists for critical reflections and exploring possible alternatives. Our future engagements with powerholders are more likely to lead to antagonisms. As discussed, we plan to strengthen our responsibility network through working with organisations such as Nijera Kori, known for their opposition to microfinance and neoliberal development, examining their strategies for holding powerholders to account and, in the process, connecting poor women to local/global allies with “voice” and “teeth” (Fox, 2015). Thus, in engaging and networking, our focus is on movement-building rather than one-off encounters to develop alliances with political force.

Finding effective ways of holding powerholders to account in situations of vast inequality is a key challenge. Agonistic praxis emphasises that “demands for accountability through dissensus [are] fundamental to democratic accountability” (Scobie et al., 2020, p. 17) requiring attention to both accounts and spaces for engagement. In this study our focus has been on developing “safe spaces” for marginalised groups to construct their own accounts and engage with sympathetic powerholders. Moving beyond this to increase pressures for rights, resources and accountability presents particular challenges in developing countries, where activists often have to contend with powerholders with strong police or military backing (Newell & Wheeler, 2006). Bangladesh’s current political trajectory is towards a police state, with democracy being sidelined through weakening of opposition, crackdowns on protests and independent media, and laws that discourage critique and free speech.²³ Any future engagements, particularly with local elites and government agencies, must heed such developments; with careful assessment of the risks of grassroots activism, especially for poor women and vulnerable groups. We see value in conferring with local social movements and drawing insights from critical development scholarship on the most effective accountability and social change strategies.

5.3. Empowerment

A core aspect of CDA involves approaching the empowerment of marginalised groups as a political issue. In the context of microfinance minimalism and women’s empowerment, this has meant challenging the neoliberal subject position of “rational economic woman” and instead promoting the political subjectivities of “empowered citizens” (Tanima et al., 2020). Accordingly, we employed our modified version of Dillard and Vinnari (2019) framework to foreground women’s voices and advance strategies for speaking back to orthodox (neoliberal) accounts. Our responsibility network focused on counter-accounts aimed at highlighting the dark side of dominant hegemonies. The counter-narratives we co-constructed with participants documented their everyday struggles with microfinance minimalism and patriarchal norms (as illustrated in Appendix 2). These narratives, while not part of ISDE’s official accounts, are arguably more powerful by standing independently. By providing a stark contrast to the images of “virtuous spirals” promoted by MFIs and development agencies, they surface the silences and exclusions of dominant powerholders’ accounts. Combined with critical academic analysis, they provide a powerful way to foreground marginalised and counter-hegemonic positions (Lehman et al., 2016; Morrison & Lowe, 2021) and a basis for collective action.

By promoting poor women’s political subjectivities and connections with gender change activists, these counter-accounts may also assist in articulating new accountability-based accountings and performance evaluation systems within MFIs; for example demands for new types of disclosure in relation to debt spirals, usurious interest rates, excessive service charges, or awareness-raising programs. Over time, as part of broader political action, we anticipate these accounts will help make women less “governable” (Brown, 2009, p. 317) and increase pressures on powerholders for greater access to rights, resources and accountability at various levels, whether through “polite requests” or more adversarial strategies (Brown et al., 2015; Newell & Wheeler, 2006). Relatedly, by raising public

²² See Lehman et al. (2016) for a similar exercise critiquing neoliberal immigration policies through immigrants’ counter-accounts and Morrison and Lowe (2021) on the construction of collective counter-accounts.

²³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/21/bangladesh-using-controversial-law-to-gag-media-free-speech>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/4/4/is-bangladesh-moving-towards-one-party-state>

awareness and exposing accountability failures, we hope they will help weaken the grip of the alluring, but misleading, win-win neoliberal narratives promoted by development agencies (Tanima et al., 2020); especially if linked with the counter-accounts of other subordinate groups as part of broader alliance-building.

We approached alliance-building in a dialogic way, treating participants as subject to power structures, but nonetheless capable of agency, self-reflection, resistance and change. This includes recognising the complex interplay of individual and collective dynamics involved in awareness-raising and social change processes (Bebbington et al., 2007; Brown & Dillard, 2013a). While in this study we have purposively engaged with several groups, in future engagements we also intend to undertake in-depth work with specific groups (e.g. poor women, government officials, local activists) to better understand opportunities for and barriers to change.

5.4. Concluding reflections

In line with Dillard and Vinnari's (2019) proposals for critical dialogic accountability, we engaged with one NGO and its wider network to create spaces for critically evaluating the impacts of microfinance minimalism on poor women. Through our engagement with various interested groups we examined the impacts of microfinance on poor women's lives and how more progressive microfinance programs might be developed, highlighting the dark side of microfinance ignored or glossed over in neoliberal discourse. We also addressed the challenges facing small-scale NGOs under neoliberal regimes, as well as the conditions of possibility associated with microfinance programs. Through our interviews and group discussions, we interrogated the politics of microfinance accountability and demonstrated the potential for critical academics, marginalised groups and activists to work together in responsibility networks to develop counter-accounts and build alliances.

Our study makes three main contributions to critical accounting research and praxis. Firstly, we demonstrate how CDAA praxis can be applied in a developing country context to support "struggles by the poor to hold the powerful to account" (Newell & Wheeler, 2006, p. 1) through forming responsibility networks, challenging dominant discourses and proposing counter-hegemonic alternatives. In rejecting technocratic-managerialist approaches to accountability, we contribute to studies based on explicitly political theorisations of accountability that move well beyond organisation-centric reporting and performance metrics (Alawattage & Azure, 2021; Brown & Tregidga, 2017; Cooper & Lapsley, 2021; Scobie et al., 2020; Tregidga & Milne, 2020). Secondly, we advance understanding of the impacts of neoliberal development on NGOs/MFIs and the everyday lives of the poor (Jayasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2011; Tanima et al., 2020; Uddin & Hopper, 2003). In particular, we advance gender studies in this field by responding to the dearth of research into poor women's experiences and subjectivities (Haynes, 2017; Lehman, 2019) and directly engaging with poor women and gender change activists. We also strengthen the interdisciplinary and feminist reach of accounting literature on microfinance (Alawattage et al., 2019; O'Leary, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020) through consolidating links with GAD studies. Like O'Leary (2017), we provide evidence of the impacts of microfinance on poor women's socio-economic situations. However, whereas her study emphasised benefits for gender equality in a rights-based NGO in rural India, our research highlights the dark side of programs based on microfinance minimalism. Rather than privileging NGOs/MFIs as the central agents of women's empowerment, we also focus on the enabling potential of the women and their advocates "acting together to facilitate... accountability from below" (Scobie et al., *in press*, p. 4). Thirdly, and relatedly, we highlight the potential for interventions by critical academics and social activists to foster democratic development; showing how CDAA praxis can create "safe spaces" for marginalised groups and others to critically interrogate the impacts of neoliberalisation (Brown & Dillard, 2013a; Molisa et al., 2012). This provides an alternative path for those sceptical of "downward accountability" practices initiated by powerholders, which are often tokenistic and closed to critical voices (Alawattage et al., 2019; Archel et al., 2011; Brown & Dillard, 2015a; Brown & Tregidga, 2017). In contrast to Dillard and Vinnari (2019), our approach also does not rely on powerholders to provide accounts; but rather strengthens "the weapons of the weak" (Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2009) through constructing counter-narratives with marginalised groups. Here we also move beyond Lehman et al. (2016) who employed immigrants' narratives (written stories and oral testimonies) as counter-accounts to highlight their lived experiences of neoliberal policies but did not engage directly with affected groups.

Future studies could examine ideological processes related to the production and consumption of hegemonic/counter-hegemonic discourses and associated (de)politicisation dynamics in detail. How concepts such as accountability, development or, indeed, CDAA are interpreted and enacted is key to their transformative potential. As Tregidga and Milne (2020, p. 16) highlight, some studies applying dialogic or agonistic lenses fail to address ideological differences and power relations sufficiently. Thus we reinforce their calls for more "contested issues-based analysis" that foregrounds rather than shies away from political conflicts (*ibid.*, p. 17). Secondly, more attention might also be paid to how ideas about agonistic praxis can be employed in institutional settings, including in policy arenas and business education (Brown & Dillard, 2015b, 2019; Wong, George, & Tanima, 2021). Here we welcome the increasing attention to CDAA in policy-related texts (e.g. Agranoff, 2017, pp. 239-40; Reilly, 2021) and accounting textbooks (Deegan, 2019, pp. 131-133), although, again, careful attention is required to the way ideas are translated. GAD discourse highlights the ways potentially empowering ideas can be incorporated into existing discourses in depoliticising ways (Batliwala, 2007); something we consider a particular risk given current trends towards "progressive neoliberalism" (Fraser, 2017) with voluntarist disclosures and stakeholder engagement too often used to provide a façade of accountability. Thirdly, given the context-specific nature of accountability struggles, future studies could investigate different sites of contestation from local to global levels; including closer attention to conscientisation, learning and mobilisation processes (Bebbington et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2021). Finally, further studies of the opportunities for and barriers to CDAA praxis, including the significant resource implications (Cooper & Morgan, 2013), most effective spaces for

intervention and new forms of expertise required (Brown & Dillard, 2021) are also warranted; especially those related to engaging counter-hegemonic perspectives. We hope this study encourages other researchers to investigate CDAA praxis further with the aim of stimulating debate about neoliberal policies in developing countries and beyond, supporting marginalised groups in their accountability struggles and generating alternatives to neoliberal hegemony.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix 1.: Interviewee details

	Identifier	Interviewee(s)	No. of people	Location
1	WR1	Women representative	1	Roufabad
2	WR2	Women representative	1	Roufabad
3	WR3	Women representative	1	Roufabad
4	WV1, WV2	Women volunteers	2	Roufabad
5	CBM	Manager (male)	1	Head Office
6	GCA1	Gender change activist (male)	1	Head Office
7	GCA2	Gender change activist (male)	1	Head Office
8	H1, WR4	Husband and wife	2	Roufabad
9	H2	Husband	1	Roufabad
10	GCA3	Gender change activist (male)	1	Head Office
11	GCA4	Gender change activist (female)	1	Home
12	MV1, WV3	Volunteers (male/female)	2	Jhoutala
13	WR5	Women representative	1	Jhoutala
14	WR6	Women representative	1	Jhoutala
15	WR7	Women representatives	1	Jhoutala
16	WR8, WR9	Women representatives	2	Jhoutala
17	MV1	Male volunteer	2	Jhoutala
18	H3	Husband	1	Jhoutala
19	H4	Husband	1	Jhoutala
20	WR10, WR11	Women representatives	2	Jhoutala
21	H5, WR10, WR11	Women representative and one husband	3	Jhoutala
22	WR10, WR11, WR12	Women representatives	3	Jhoutala
23	WR13	Women representative	1	Roufabad
24	GCA5	Gender change activist (male)	1	Head Office
25	GCA6	Gender change activist (female)	1	Home
26	WR14	Women representative	1	Jhoutala
27	ED	Executive Director (male)	1	Head Office
28	GCA7	Gender change activist (female)	1	Head Office
29	CBM	Manager (male)	1	Head Office
30	WR15	Women representative	1	Roufabad

Group sessions

	Location	No. of people	Identifier	Participants
1	Roufabad area	5	GD1	Women representatives and husband
2	Roufabad area	6	GD2	Women representatives and women volunteers
3	Jhoutala	6	GD3	Women representatives and volunteers
4	Jhoutala	6	GD4	Husbands and women representatives
6	Chaandgaon	4	GD5	Gender change activists and microfinance representatives

Appendix 2: Example counter-narrative²⁴

Ayesha & Abeed Rahman

Ayesha has four family members – two sons, one daughter and her husband. Her children study at Bangabondhu High School. Her husband has a small eatery in the local market. Ayesha cooks food for the shop and knits garments to sell. She works very hard to manage these duties and has no leisure time for herself.

Ayesha has one 30,000 taka microfinance loan from DSK. She is repaying the loan over 46 weeks, with instalments of 750 taka paid every Monday – of which 90 taka is interest. This is her third loan from DSK, and she also deposits 100 taka savings every week with them. She shares the instalment payments with her husband. She feels a huge portion of her earnings is taken in interest, although advises DSK's interest rate is lower than other MFIs. Since she and her husband have only one major earning source (the shop), it is sometimes hard to manage all the household expenses such as children's education, house rent, gas and water bills etc.

When she first took loans from DSK, they held meetings to explain the rules and regulations, but now there are no meetings. Fieldworkers just come weekly to collect loan repayments. Though initially they had very strict weekly payment rules, now borrowers can extend repayments to a month. In general DSK's behavior is good, she said. Ayesha feels it is up to a person whether they make good use of loan money. Microfinance can be beneficial if loans are spent effectively, for example in a business like she did.

Ayesha is aware women do not get all the rights they should. A man doesn't face these boundaries. She thinks household chores should be shared between husband and wife, as they are both responsible for running a family.

Abeed is Ayesha's husband. He has taken a loan from DSK in his name for his wife's business. He describes his family as poor and said he had to take the loan because he was facing financial crisis. Though Ayesha didn't mention it, Abeed said he faced a lot of troubles while repaying instalments. In his words – he had to create new problems to solve current ones. He took another private loan of 10,000 taka from someone on which he has to pay 100 taka daily for four months.

He has seen many families get broken from the microfinance system, having to sell assets to repay loans. He says many people get hooked up in loans taking new loans to repay older ones. They can't get out of this spiral because some families don't have any regular income. When they take a big loan, it's impossible for them to repay it. They then take out another high interest loan; then another. Some use loans for mere entertainment. In his area, some people had to sell their houses to repay loans. His landlady was in this situation. After that she neither had money, nor a place to live.

Abeed notes that microfinance can be destructive for family relations. His wife took the first loan without informing him, stressing him a lot. He says if they had taken the decision mutually his life could have been different as he might not have had to do petty things to earn. There were days when they had nothing to eat because he had to pay instalments. They had many disputes over finance. To save Ayesha, he had to take another loan.

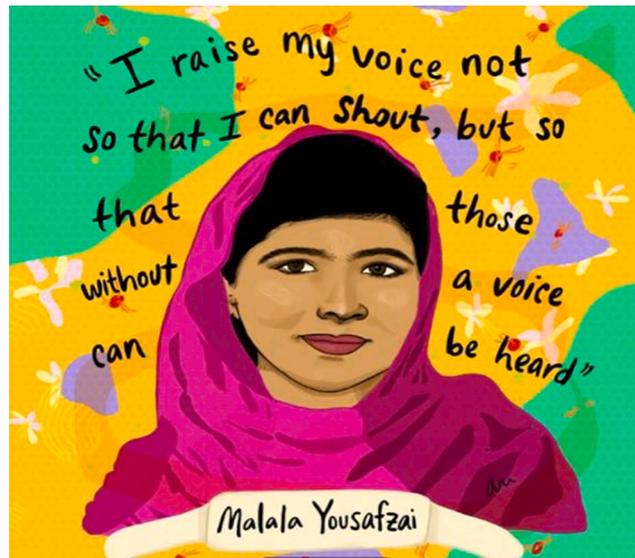
According to Abeed, society believes in equality now. If a husband and wife mutually decide who'll do what, a family will run smoothly. He acknowledged Ayesha helped a lot in his restaurant. However he thinks she should assess whether her knitting business is profitable. He'd like her to stop if she faces loss as they have to pay the loan instalments. He would have preferred her to be happy with what he earns. He isn't totally against his wife working outside. However he advises she won't be able to get a respectful job as she's not educated. So he'd like her to be at home and take care of their children. He believes household chores should be shared by both husband and wife. He says if he makes her do all the work he'll be treating her as a maid, not as a companion.

Abeed said he would be interested in attending meetings on social issues. He seemed to have a clear idea about violence against women and is aware of the wage gap between men and women. He thinks inequality is very acute in Bangladesh. To change, he says men have to change their mentality first. Leaders and elders have to respect women. There should be campaigns about respecting women, eradicating discrimination and paying equal wages.

Appendix 3: Initiating group discussions

The following image of Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for female education and Nobel Prize laureate, was circulated during group sessions as a way of initiating discussions.

²⁴ For reasons of space, this narrative has been shortened and the names used are pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. Full copies of this and other counter-narratives are available from the corresponding author.



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