



# 'Selling Our Own Skin:' Social dispossession through microcredit in rural Bangladesh



Kasia Paprocki

Department of Development Sociology, Warren Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, United States

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I articulate a notion of 'social dispossession,' an optic that extends current theorizing on agrarian dispossession into the realm of social reproduction, by examining the testimonies of microcredit borrowers in rural Bangladesh. In recent years, research on microcredit has highlighted new forms of subject-making employed by microcredit and other NGO entrepreneurship development programs. These developments have received insufficient attention in scholarship on agrarian change, both globally and in specific places. I correct this by arguing that microcredit drives social dispossession through three specific mechanisms: the confiscation of assets necessary to social reproduction (as well as to production); the construction of debt relations within a community which reshape what reproduction can look like; and the re-configuration of women's social status and subjectivities in relation to their communities.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent years have seen the growth and intensification of debate among development practitioners and academics about the impacts and efficacy of microcredit in the Global South (Banerjee et al., 2010a, 2010b; Federici, 2014; Gine et al., 2010; Hulme and Arun, 2009; Karim, 2008; Karlan and Zinman, 2011; Mader, 2015; Sanyal, 2014). Perhaps nowhere are these debates more present than in Bangladesh, the home of Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank, winners of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for creating a microcredit model that has been replicated around the world. A growing trend in the popular, policy, and academic literatures on microcredit is the analysis of financial prospects of microfinance institutions (MFIs) – specifically, how to make microfinance more profitable for lenders (Christen et al., 2003; Cull et al., 2009; de Mel et al., 2007; Hermes et al., 2011; Kar and Swain, 2014; Louis et al., 2013).

In this paper, I argue that this discursive framing is indicative of the nature of microcredit as a tool for and expression of the development of capitalism in rural Bangladesh. In contrast to critiques of microcredit that examine predatory lending practices and attribute abuses of microcredit borrowers to institutional failures of particular MFIs or differences in microcredit models (Banerjee et al., 2010a; Hulme and Arun, 2011), I draw on testimonies of microcredit borrowers and argue these abuses are endemic to the very

nature of microcredit itself as a tool for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Instead of seeing these abuses as exception or failure, I center my analysis on understanding what these programs do accomplish, and what the relationship is between these accomplishments, the production of new subjects and forms of subjectivity, and the development project. Specifically, I argue that microcredit generates what I call *social dispossession* through three mechanisms: (i) the confiscation of assets necessary to social reproduction (as well as to production); (ii) the construction of debt relations within a community which reshape what reproduction can look like; and (iii) the re-configuration of women's social status and subjectivities in relation to their communities.

This social dispossession supports the expansion of capitalism in rural communities in Bangladesh today. While microcredit is clearly not the only driver of development and agrarian change in rural Bangladesh, its extension into virtually every village in the country, usually through multiple different programs and agencies, reaching more than two thirds of the country's population (Khandker and Sammad, 2014), suggests that it is a primary driver of development intervention and the extension of debt into rural communities. I define social dispossession as *the coercive expropriation of means of social reproduction (either social or material) toward the reproduction of capitalist social relations.*<sup>1</sup> My

<sup>1</sup> Social dispossession is related to but differentiated from primitive accumulation through its focus on social reproduction (whereas the latter is concerned with the separation of producers from the means of production).

E-mail address: [kp354@cornell.edu](mailto:kp354@cornell.edu)

delineation of the concept of social dispossession builds on key analyses of other scholars who have examined microcredit in relation to Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession (Bateman, 2010; Elyachar, 2005; Harvey, 2004, 2005; Karim, 2011; Keating et al., 2010).<sup>2</sup> These analyses have drawn attention to the urgency of recognizing dispossession both in relation to production and social reproduction toward uniting the progressive social movements of the twenty-first century (Glassman, 2006; Harvey, 2004, 2007; McMichael, 2005, 2008; Negi and Auerbach, 2009). Understanding microcredit via the concept of social dispossession lends conceptual clarity to an investigation of contemporary development practice in Bangladesh and its interventions in rural communities today.

This exploration of microcredit is concerned with its contemporary role in what Gillian Hart refers to as "big D" Development, a postwar international project of planned intervention at multiple scales in the decolonizing societies of the so-called "third world" (Cowen and Shenton, 1995; Hart, 2010; McMichael, 2004). Through the field of critical development studies, scholars have critiqued the material and discursive attempts to impose a Western teleology of progress through such interventions (Escobar, 1994; Sachs, 1992), while also understanding development as a series of multiple, nonlinear but interconnected paths of socio-spatial change (Hart, 2006; Ludden, 1992; Rist, 1997). Others have examined particular development interventions as apparatuses of governance, examining not what they claim or fail to do, but as historically specific social institutions with concrete outcomes (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007; Mosse, 2005). It is to this latter body of work that this piece makes a particular contribution. While the focus here is on microcredit, it is but one of many forms of development interventions which result in social dispossession in rural Bangladesh and elsewhere (cf. Paprocki and Cons, 2014).

Microcredit functions as a device for the systematic ordering or "enframing" (Mitchell, 1988) of daily life and practices of social reproduction, resulting in the creation of certain kinds of subjects through the creating and intensification of capitalist social relations (Li, 2007). By examining the testimonies of borrowers as embedded constituents of complex local dynamics of production and social reproduction, I am critical of the fundamental assumptions made about these borrowers and their lives and livelihood strategies by the microcredit programs that aspire to transform them.<sup>3</sup> This critique is derived from the testimonies of borrowers themselves, who focus less on the material impacts of microcredit than they do on its impacts on social reproduction and subject formation.

In order to understand the process by which microcredit reconfigures lives, social relations, and subjectivities in rural Bangladesh, I expand Farshad Araghi's conception of depeasantization (Araghi, 1995) through a feminist political economy approach to social reproduction. This framework offers the opportunity to understand modes of dispossession taking place beyond the realm of commodity production, including what Shelley Feldman and Charles Geisler refer to as *in situ displacement*: modes of dispossession through which people are displaced without being physically removed from their homes and communities (Feldman and Geisler, 2012). By "social reproduction," I refer to the work conducted outside of

the strict sphere of commodity production, meaning both biological and physical labor that reproduces individuals, families, and communities.<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholars of social reproduction examine the historical separation under capitalism of production from consumption and reproduction, positing that this separation causes the under-valuation of women's labor in the home. I conceptualize social reproduction as inclusive of both household labor as well as what Julia Elyachar refers to as "phatic labor," the work to produce and reproduce social infrastructure, means of communication, and markers of value in a community upon which the creation of economic value ultimately rests (Elyachar, 2010).

This focus on social reproduction and the concept of social dispossession is an inducement to understanding microcredit through a feminist agrarian political economy. Analysis of social reproduction has long been a critical tool for feminist political economists. It is highlighted particularly in studies of paid and unpaid gendered household labor and other care work (Mitchell et al., 2003). However, attention to social reproduction does more than help us to better understand the domestic sphere, it illuminates the ways in which production and markets are socially embedded, and how diffuse the dynamics of dispossession are in relation to both. I suggest that social dispossession is a critical dynamic in contemporary agrarian transformation. Microcredit not only operates through a governmentality which shapes the social relations through which production is carried out; it also re-shapes the very conditions of social reproduction which themselves make production possible.

Specifically, I explore these transformations through a concrete examination of microcredit lending in Arampur,<sup>5</sup> a village in rural Northern Bangladesh. By identifying the role of microcredit in social dispossession in rural Bangladesh, we can better understand how the internal logics of development interventions are intertwined with the expansion of capitalism in rural Bangladesh and how particular microcredit interventions are fundamental to the implementation of more general processes of global capitalist development (McMichael, 2005). I highlight particular modes of dispossession in a specific context in order to shed light on the reproduction of capitalist social relations more broadly. I suggest that the use of borrower testimonies to understand these global processes both provides a perspective on the conditions of rural livelihoods in a particular place, as well as illustrates the dynamics of actually existing capitalism from a marginalized standpoint.

My analysis builds on and contributes to a robust and growing critical literature on microcredit and its impacts on the lives of its borrowers and their communities (Bateman, 2010, 2012; Bateman and Maclean, forthcoming; Cons and Paprocki, 2010; Elyachar, 2005; Federici, 2014; Fernando, 1997, 2006; Karim, 2008, 2011; Maclean, 2013; Rahman, 1999; Rankin, 2001; Roy, 2010; Taylor, 2011, 2012). These studies have explored the ways in which microcredit disciplines borrowers and engenders neoliberal subjectivities in the Global South. Research from Bangladesh reveals that over-saturation of microcredit services has led to cyclical debt, borrowing for consumption needs, and the entrenchment of clientelism and patriarchal power relations in rural communities (Cons and Paprocki, 2010; Fernando, 1997; Karim, 2011; Rahman, 1999).

This study extends these critical perspectives on microcredit by suggesting an additional dimension of the impacts of microcredit programs. While some have recognized the role of microcredit in accumulation by dispossession, much of the critical literature on

<sup>2</sup> Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession has brought renewed attention to Marx's theory of primitive accumulation (specifically its dynamics under neoliberal capitalism), and has been the source of considerable debate (Adnan, 2015; Ashman and Callinicos, 2006; Brenner, 2006; De Angelis, 2007; Fine, 2006; Glassman, 2006; Hall, 2012; Levien, 2011, 2013; Webber, 2008; Wood, 2006). It is not the goal of this essay to mediate these debates, but to highlight social dispossession as one aspect of what Adnan refers to as the "diverse repertoire" of primitive accumulation (Adnan, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> On disparities between idealized notions of poverty and rural life held by development agencies and MFIs versus experiences of recipients themselves, see also (Cons and Paprocki, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> I draw on the broad tradition of feminist studies of social reproduction, with specific reference to Bakker and Gill (2003), Caffentzis (2002), Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa (1999), Dalla Costa and James (1972), Federici (2004, 2012), Ferguson (1999) and Mies (1986).

<sup>5</sup> The name of the village has been changed to protect the identities of respondents.

microcredit has focused on a Foucauldian analysis of microcredit's function as a tool of governance, highlighting the breakdown of microcredit's ideological project as a triumphalist neoliberal governmentality. By examining microcredit through the lens of social dispossession, I illuminate the success of the concomitant material goals of the reproduction of capitalist social relations. While these possibilities are not mutually exclusive, the case presented in this paper suggests that neither do they necessarily go hand in hand. If microcredit is understood as a tool of governance, as many of the Foucauldian critiques have emphasized, then indeed, the current conjuncture, characterized by widespread default and the failure of MFIs to discipline unruly borrowers into successful entrepreneurial subjects, is witnessing a failure of microcredit. This failure notwithstanding, if microcredit is understood as a tool of social dispossession, then we are witnessing the tremendous success of a developmentalist paradigm that reproduces the social relations inherent to the reproduction of capitalism. The use here of social dispossession is intended to draw attention to the insidious processes of dispossession which take place without physical displacement, but which nevertheless have serious and structural impacts on the lives and livelihoods of individuals and communities.

Of particular relevance to the argument of this paper is the analysis of new modes of development by which what Ananya Roy has called "bottom billion capitalism" results in wealth extraction through the reconfiguration of social relations (Roy, 2012). Many researchers of microcredit see the creation of new entrepreneurial subjects through microcredit as a tool of neoliberal development and governmentality (Elyachar, 2005; Karim, 2011; Maclean, 2013; Rankin, 2001, 2002). Elyachar and Lamia Karim have both drawn on David Harvey's work on accumulation by dispossession to explore the use of microcredit in the neoliberal politics of privatization and the expansion of free markets (Elyachar, 2005; Karim, 2011). My own analysis is informed by this understanding of governmentality, and explores the political economy implications of this reconfiguration of social relations and broader processes of agrarian change.

In Bangladesh, the transformations wrought by bottom billion capitalism have permeated every level of politics and social relations, from national dialogues on the roles of NGOs and the state in development, and what shape that development will take, to relations of production and social reproduction in the remotest of rural communities. Moreover, the saturation of microcredit in these communities is great enough to have affected deep transformations of the entire agrarian landscape.<sup>6</sup> MFIs in Bangladesh inhabit a range of different formal institutional frameworks, from non-registered organizations to non-profit NGOs to private banks and semi-public governmental agencies. The Grameen Bank itself and the majority of its family of companies ("social businesses") are not, strictly speaking, non-governmental organizations; they are predominantly for-profit corporate entities. However, they dominate a civil society space and discourse in Bangladesh that is conceived of through a (not-for-profit) NGO development paradigm, which is, in fact, increasingly pushed toward corporate for-profit models. That this move is itself indicative of the processes I aim to examine is a topic for another paper. For now, it is sufficient to understand that the microcredit saturation in Bangladesh, both across the country and within particular communities, is so extensive that it represents a key mechanism through which relations of development are carried out and intensified in Bangladesh today.

In Arampur alone, a village of approximately 1500 households, there are eight different microcredit agencies with branches servicing the local community, and any other NGO services are programs

accompanying these microcredit programs.<sup>7</sup> Rangpur, the north-western division in which Arampur is located, is subject to annual flooding and a seasonal food insecurity known locally as *monga*, which intensify the general patterns of social and ecological vulnerability that are pervasive throughout rural Bangladesh. As a result, the patterns explored here concerning the impacts of microcredit on rural lives and livelihoods are not of a qualitatively different nature from those experienced in the rest of the country, although they may suggest an intensification of the effects of such borrowing. Still, as of 2013, Rangpur was home to only 5.2% of the country's MFI branches (Mahmud and Tulla, 2015), suggesting that the level of saturation, and thus intensity of observed impacts, may yet be greater in other parts of the country. In any case, while the testimonies examined here are of course specific to the social and geographical context of Arampur, they nevertheless can be understood as illustrative of broader dynamics resulting from the intensification of microcredit elsewhere in rural Bangladesh.

## 2. Microcredit and agrarian dispossession

The rapid growth of microcredit and the social dispossession resulting from it must be situated in relation to the broader political economy of agrarian change in Bangladesh today. In order to understand the context in which the demand for this credit has grown among the rural poor, three key dynamics must be understood: (i) Historically inequitable land relations, marked in particular by a colonial legacy of extensive sub-infeudation which continues to dramatically shape agrarian class relations, land tenure, and politics in Bangladesh today (Boyce, 1987; Iqbal, 2010; Van Schendel, 1982, 2009). In particular, extraordinarily high rates of landlessness result in an especially precarious class of sharecroppers and day laborers; (ii) though the country is rapidly urbanizing, the vast majority of its population continues to be rural, underscoring the importance of agrarian livelihoods in contemporary Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup> However, structural adjustment has led to national development policies focusing on the development of the country's garment export sector, which the World Bank has described as "Bangladesh's most successful industry" (Muzzini and Aparicio, 2013). There can be no doubt of the role of rural dispossession in producing an abundant supply of surplus labor which supports the growth of this industry; (iii) The massive proliferation of donor-driven NGOs has been widely recognized to have had a depoliticizing effect on Bangladeshi civil society, while it has also facilitated the privatization of a wide variety of social services such as health care, education, and food security programs (Banks et al., 2015; Feldman, 2003; Karim, 2001; White, 1996, 1999). This has resulted in the decline of social safety nets (in the absence of which, borrowers often turn to credit), as well as political mechanisms for seeking redress which might otherwise have supported vulnerable borrowers.

Debt has historically played a key role in depeasantization in Bengal (Cooper, 1988). Through indebtedness, small farmers have been dispossessed of their land and become sharecroppers or migrated to cities to find other work. Microcredit agencies are increasingly filling the role in this process once controlled by powerful landholders and local moneylenders. Though disposses-

<sup>6</sup> According to Muhammad Yunus, there are more microcredit borrowers per square mile in Bangladesh than anywhere else in the world (Yunus, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Notable examples of accompanying programs include a chicken-farming scheme through which borrowers were obliged to purchase imported chickens in order to take microcredit loans (of the few respondents who took part in the program, all described the chickens dying shortly after taking the loan). There is also a BRAC primary school in the village; respondents whose children attend the school described both feeling pressure from their children's teachers to take microcredit loans, and having their children expelled from school when they were unable to make payments on their loans.

<sup>8</sup> In 1970, 90% of Bangladesh's population lived in rural communities (Van Schendel, 2009), and despite major shifts in development and urbanization, 67% of the population continued to be rural in 2013 (The World Bank, 2014).

sion of peasants from their land and means of production has historically been the key factor in agrarian dispossession, in Bangladesh today, depeasantization is also markedly driven by social dispossession.

In bringing together theories of depeasantization with feminist political economy approaches to social reproduction, I specifically draw on feminist scholarship on the spatial and gendered divisions that entrench women's subordination in agrarian societies under capitalism and which recognizes the domestic sphere as a realm of value-creation. My analysis thus builds on feminist critiques of political economic analyses of agrarian change, which illuminate the complexities of materialist approaches that are concerned exclusively with property rights, and which highlight the interconnections between the domestic sphere and broader political economic processes (Jackson, 2003; Razavi, 2009).

The growing role of capitalism's disruption of social reproduction is of increasing importance to scholars concerned with the political economy of agrarian change (Adnan, 2015; Hall, 2012; Levien, 2011; McMichael, 2005, 2008, 2009; Roberts, 2008; Taylor, 2011). Attempts to come to terms with this process have been forced to confront long-standing debates and foundational concepts in political economy, and their often messy fit with the dynamics of contemporary capitalism, particularly in the context of the Global South. Farshad Araghi's work on depeasantization is one such successful negotiation of these debates (Araghi, 1995, 2003). Via the world-historical method, Araghi seeks to refocus the peasant question on the problematic of labor, a shift which he demonstrates has fairly dramatic consequences for how local and global change are conceptualized. I propose that social dispossession is a related but distinct process which can be observed by taking a similar relationship to Marx's historical method.

By way of his re-examination of the concept of food regimes, Araghi proposes that the subordination of the problematic of labor to the problematic of development has the consequence of aligning Marxism with teleological theories of underdevelopment, and of constructing questions of class, exploitation, and dispossession as secondary to concerns of bourgeois nationalisms of the Global South. A narrowly economic analytical lens trained on capital as opposed to labor renders unintelligible disparate impacts on individuals and communities and their struggles and negotiations thereof (Ramamurthy, 2011). As such, Araghi argues 'for a return to the social problematic of labor and the local/global contextualization of its existence and reproduction... [which] is self-consciously aware of the standpoint from which it sees the world, and thus capable of sustaining a theoretical and political project' (Araghi, 2003). In the case of microcredit, this entails a drastically different methodological framework from those used by microcredit agencies, which primarily focus on repayment rates, and thus are chiefly concerned with returns to capital.

Social dispossession directs attention to a dynamic of agrarian change which is similarly unintelligible to capital. Often, discussions of accumulation by dispossession in agrarian communities focus on urban migration (Araghi, 2001; Weis, 2007). While empirical accounts of rural-urban migration and booming urban population growth are no doubt accurate (Streatfield and Karar, 2008; The World Bank, 2007), the profoundly gendered nature of dispossession in rural communities is highlighted only through attention to social reproduction. Thus, understanding social dispossession (even in the absence of displacement) offers an important tool in forging a feminist analysis of agrarian change in Bangladesh today.

### 3. Methodology

Fieldwork for this research was conducted between June and August of 2007 with support from the Chicago-based Goldin

Institute, using a collaborative research method known as Community Based Oral Testimony (CBOT),<sup>9</sup> as well as through follow-up visits in 2008, 2009, and 2010. After identifying ten villagers to participate as community researchers, they were trained in basic qualitative research techniques, and we worked together with them to develop a research agenda adapted to local conditions and concerns. This process alerted us to concerns we otherwise would not have examined, such as the pervasive use of microcredit loans for dowry, a serious concern for the community that had previously made little appearance in the scholarly literature on microcredit.

Interviews were conducted over a period of eighteen days. In the first week and a half, each of the community researchers conducted ten to twelve semi-structured interviews (for a total of 150 respondents in all) using digital audio recorders. These interviews focused on baseline information regarding microcredit use and experience with microcredit organizations, as well as key demographic data. In the second phase of interviews, each interviewer chose a subset of five to six key informants among those they had already interviewed, and who had indicated they may have more in-depth stories to share. They subsequently conducted longer (forty-five to ninety minute) unstructured interviews focusing on life histories and perceptions of historical change that the gradual introduction of MFIs brought to both the village and household level relations (both economic and social). This dual-phase approach allowed community researchers to develop trust and rapport with their respondents, enabling them to elicit stories they believed would otherwise have been off-limits. The community researchers also recorded their own audio field notes, which contributed substantively to the analysis of the data.

The analytical process was similarly iterative and collaborative. Once transcribed, the data was coded starting with categories developed cooperatively with the community researchers, and incorporating additional trends as they emerged. Key themes and conclusions were revealed through the coding process, which both confirmed the community researchers' initial assumptions and exposed additional findings and concerns. Subsequently, these trends in the data, along with provisional interpretation and analysis, were shared with the community researchers, who augmented and expanded the analysis based on their own interpretations of the data. The findings presented here represent key themes and analyses that emerged from this process, while particular representative cases are used to illuminate the results.

By destabilizing traditional power dynamics between researcher and subject, the method elicited powerful stories which paint an incisive picture of the processes through which microcredit restructures individual and community livelihoods. This method has considerable implications for both the results and analysis of the research. While the findings are in line with those of other researchers examining microcredit in Bangladesh,<sup>10</sup> the focus on the reconfiguration of social relations was particularly acute. By shifting the control of data collection to microcredit borrowers themselves within Arampur, much of the power over framing the impacts of microcredit is devolved to recipients. This shift in power is fundamental to the theoretical and methodological approach of the project. As Gillian Rose writes, "the authority of academic knowledge is put into question not by self-conscious positioning but by gaps that give space to, and are affected by, other knowledges" (Rose, 1997). Following Rose and other scholars of feminist methodologies, the use of CBOT in research and analysis recognizes that all research knowledge is situated and is generated collaboratively, and that this recognition is central to a radical politics of engagement (Abu-Lughod, 1990, 1993; Haraway, 1991; Katz,

<sup>9</sup> For more on this methodology, see Cons and Paprocki (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Fernando (1997, 2006), Karim (2008, 2011), Muhammad (2009, 2015), Shonchoy (2014) and Wood and Sharif (1997).

1994; Miles and Crush, 1993; Naples and Sachs, 2000; Rose, 1997; Visweswaran, 1994, Wolford, 2010).

The very absence of narratives from Arampur of borrowers' material gain through microcredit, which overwhelmingly characterize the popular and dominant framings of microcredit, is notable. I do not doubt that there may be borrowers in Arampur, and even respondents who participated in this study, who did benefit materially from taking microcredit loans, despite the notable absence of such narratives in the data. However, the particular meanings generated through these conversations surrounding microcredit and its impact on this community are salient insofar as they suggest a community-level interpretation of the role of microcredit in social dispossession. That the material impacts of microcredit borrowing are ultimately marginal to respondents' own overall assessments of microcredit motivates the analytical approach of this paper. I examine directly the social impacts of microcredit, as discussed by borrowers, and explore the ways in which these social shifts should be understood alongside material shifts as drivers of agrarian change.

#### 4. Arampur

Among Arampur's 1500 households, somewhere between one third to one half are functionally landless, having no cultivable land of their own. Most villagers are agriculturalists, many working as sharecroppers or day laborers either as their sole source of income or to supplement income from cultivation on smaller plots of land. Farmers primarily cultivate high-yield varieties of rice, jute, and potatoes, supported intermittently by government pesticide and fertilizer subsidies. Though some work as petty traders, rickshaw pullers or, for the poorest, day laborers in nearby brickfields, off-farm earning opportunities are scarce. As in other villages in Bangladesh, the vast majority of these households have taken microcredit loans, and most hold upwards of four to five loans at any given time.

Rangpur Division is subject to both a seasonal food insecurity known as *monga* as well as pervasive seasonal flooding due to monsoonal overflows of the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries. Recognition of *monga* is crucial to understanding the rural political economy of this region and the cycle of accumulation and indebtedness instilled by microcredit (Shonchoy, 2014). Though *monga* can be found throughout Bangladesh, it is experienced most severely and pervasively in Rangpur. Taking place in September and October, before the *aman* rice harvest, it is also referred to as "*mora Kartik*" which roughly translates to "the month of death." A key feature of this phenomenon is that it is not the result of a food shortage – Rangpur is a food surplus area – but of a lack of access to food caused by a seasonal decline in agricultural employment opportunities for the landless (Mazumder and Wencong, 2012). While this time is experienced as a lean period for most people in the region, it is the poor and landless who are most acutely affected by *monga*. A movement in the region toward industrial agriculture and market integration has done little to ameliorate problems with food security for rural inhabitants, and has made the poor particularly vulnerable to *monga*.

While respondents described a range of times of need or crisis as occasions for taking loans, such as a daughter's wedding or an illness in the family, they most commonly reported taking microcredit loans for consumption during *monga*, instigating a year-round cycle of indebtedness. As one respondent explains,

During *monga*, we maintain our need for food with loans. Becoming indebted to the NGOs, we go on through our intolerable disasters. But if any borrower is not able to pay an installment in time, just after the deadline the NGO workers come to

her house and demand the payment viciously. They force us to pay at any cost. If the payment is late, they cruelly taunt and insult us without end. Though we ask them for some flexibility, they won't stop abusing us.

This respondent's testimony calls attention to both the desperation of many microcredit borrowers who take loans to address consumption deficits, particularly during the *monga* season, as well as the very serious impacts on those who take loans and are unable to repay them. These borrowers describe being compelled to take loans due to their existing conditions of dispossession (from land and livelihood opportunities), driving them into a cycle of indebtedness from which they have little hope for escape. This highlights the imbrication of microcredit with ongoing dynamics of agrarian dispossession that are already producing precarious rural livelihoods. In this way, microcredit drives a cycle of transformation that both responds to and is constitutive of dispossession.

Insofar as *monga* is exacerbated through a growing NGO-led push to integrate local agricultural markets into regional economies, borrowers who are driven to take microcredit loans to cope with their dispossession from agricultural work and food self-sufficiency are struggling to subsist under conditions which are already marked by exploitation through capitalist social relations. This suggests a dialectical relationship between social dispossession and other modes of dispossession, resembling what Adnan has referred to as an "integrated and recursive causal relationship between primitive accumulation and capitalist production" (Adnan, 2015; see also Levien, 2011). We can thus see through the phenomena of *monga* that dispossession is both a precondition and a driver of social dispossession itself.

##### 4.1. Dispossession and social reproduction

Microcredit's focus on women's entrepreneurship development carries the implication that women's extant household labor is distinct from the realm of economic production – that their work in the home does not contribute to the earning capacity of their households – and that this autonomy therefore offers a potential source for additional exploitation and surplus value extraction. With the proliferation of microcredit lending, women's responsibilities for household labor persist and remain invisible, while their gendered role as microcredit borrowers becomes the basis of their further social and economic dispossession.

Although microcredit's rhetoric is predicated on the notion of non-collateralized debt (in theory, lending to people who have literally nothing), MFIs are in fact always able to identify assets with which to collateralize even the smallest loans. Borrowers in Arampur describe the loan screening process as involving an exhaustive cataloguing of their physical assets by MFI field workers – everything from bicycle rickshaws and farming implements to women's clothing and cooking utensils. One respondent explains this process of collateralization, 'they have records of everything we own, like cows, chickens or ducks. They have records of all of our movable and immovable property. They enquire about our property to be sure that we are able to repay the loan. They write it all down in their logs, and the officials examine them before they give us any money.' Reports from Arampur indicate the pervasive practice of confiscation of borrower assets in response to delayed loan payment. Asset confiscation allows MFIs to maintain their famously high loan repayment rates, which are used as evidence of their success.

While some borrowers reported agricultural tools and land being taken away when they were unable to repay their loans, respondents more commonly described having the corrugated tin sheets with which their homes are constructed being torn down

and sold for scrap metal.<sup>11</sup> Other commonly confiscated material assets include food stores, pots, pans, and other cooking utensils, bed frames and other furniture, women's saris, jewelry, and social security cards for obtaining food security assistance from the government. One borrower explained,

My husband has to go far away from the village for work, as work isn't available in the village all the time. What would our children eat if he wasn't working? If he sits idle at home even one day, we all have to starve that day. Because he knew this, my husband left home in search of a job. But we couldn't pay the loan installments here. NGO field workers came to our house almost every day. Having no other options, I sold a hen one day and a gourd the other day and our tree the next day to pay the loan installments. One day, I found nothing left to sell and I stopped repaying the installments. The field workers came and they swore at me. They were persistent and they said 'you have to pay the installments by any means.' I told them that I was unable to pay the installments as I did not have money and my husband was not home. He was gone, out of the village. But the field workers would not listen to me. I usually repaid the installments on time and ran my family well when my husband was home. But what could I do when he wasn't home? One day, 12 people came and entered my house and started taking away all of our belongings, like our bed, dishes, pots and pans, and so many necessary things. They even took the tin roof and walls off of the house.

The value of these confiscated material possessions to the work of social reproduction is conspicuous. It signals the multivalent strategies through which social dispossession is carried out through microcredit.

Much of the critical scholarship on microcredit has explored the reliance of microcredit programs on precisely the oppressive social institutions entrenching gender and class inequalities which microcredit supposedly intends to destabilize (Fernando, 1997; Karim, 2011). Elyachar has gone further by suggesting that through microenterprise projects intending to 'empower' their subjects, culture has become a new frontier of accumulation (Elyachar, 2002). In Arampur we find that microcredit not only relies on inequitable power relations within families and communities, but that it fundamentally restructures these social relations. Testimonies from Arampur suggest that women's roles in the family, community, and division of labor are transformed through the saturation of microcredit and their participation in credit programs. More than proposing the reliance of microcredit programming on patriarchal social norms, a focus on social dispossession draws attention to transformations of gender relations, and the ways in which they shape rural livelihoods.

Though the vast majority of microcredit borrowers are women, it is also commonly recognized that women rarely have control over the use of these loans, which usually falls to male family members (Karim, 2011; Montgomery et al., 1996). While scholars of microcredit in Bangladesh have debated the importance of women's control over their loans to the empowerment potential of microcredit programs (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996; Kabeer, 2001), there is little question that the majority of women's participation in the use of microcredit loans is partial at most.

However, evidence from Arampur suggests that women not only don't control their loans, but that they are often induced to take loans against their will by their husbands and families. In Arampur, women are often compelled to take one or more microcredit loans through dowry contracts, and harassed by husbands

and in-laws unless and until they do so. Women respondents described complex negotiations in which they were pressured to take microcredit loans by their husbands and in-laws, in many cases with the threat of being sent back to their natal homes if they failed to do so. Two cases in Arampur in which young women had apparently been driven to suicide as a result of the confluence of pressures from microcredit loans and inflated dowry demands were repeatedly invoked by respondents. However, after taking loans and handing them over to their husbands and male family members, a practice also observed by many other researchers (Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996; Kabeer, 2001; Karim, 2011), when women and their families were unable to make payments on the loans, women were derided and ostracized by family members and neighbors as a result of this non-payment. Despite their complex roles as embedded actors negotiating a wide variety of relationships and responsibilities, MFIs' focus on women results in their bearing the responsibility for the reconfiguration of social relations resulting from the expansion of microcredit. One woman who had never taken a microcredit loan described this situation succinctly; 'Women go outside the home now; society blames them.'

This compulsion is reinforced by the requirement by MFIs in Bangladesh of a woman's husband or other male relative's picture and signature alongside her own upon withdrawal of a microcredit loan. Respondents reported that widows, unmarried women, and women who had been abandoned by their husbands, or who otherwise were without a responsible male relative, are excluded from microcredit borrowing. Moreover, that male respondents often referred to their wives' loans as 'my loan' highlights the social relations under which women take and have access to loans. Women's new role as microcredit borrower becomes entrenched through this process, and although they are rarely involved in the use of loans, they always bear the responsibility of their repayment.

The disciplining practices of microcredit agencies serve to cement these transformed social relations. In their capacity as microcredit borrowers, regardless of who controls the loan, women attend weekly meetings along with other borrowers, who are collectively responsible for one another's repayment. Before being given loans, Grameen borrowers are required to memorize and recite the '16 Decisions', which illustrate the normative mission of MFIs in relation to their borrowers (Yunus, 1999). They comprise a series of developmentalist imperatives, from using pit latrines and educating children, to commitments to commodity crop cultivation and undertaking large investments for enterprise growth. Though none of the borrowers interviewed in Arampur could recall a single one of these Decisions, their normative function persisted. The individual responsibility of female borrowers for repaying loans, cemented through the MFI ideology of the 'empowered' unitary female subject of microcredit, results in often intense forms of social exclusion and ridicule. This experience is felt acutely among the poorest women, whose already marginal status is exacerbated when they are unable to make loan payments. These women described cruel mocking and derision by their neighbors, criticizing them for their participation in microcredit lending groups. One respondent cited what she described as a common taunt directed at female borrowers: 'Grameen Bank *dhoro, shamir kotha chharo*,' meaning 'get involved with the Grameen Bank, forsake your husband.'

Despite their individual senses of isolation and dispossession through microcredit, borrowers' commitment to ensure the repayment of other members of their loan group remained strong. Women are thus enlisted in the process of cementing the new gender roles and inflicting the social dispossession of fellow borrowers that they themselves simultaneously experience. The collective borrowing groups are used as a disciplining mechanism in ensuring loan repayment. Women are compelled by their loan officers

<sup>11</sup> This conforms with Karim's findings in rural Bangladesh concerning collateralization and confiscation of borrower's assets (Karim, 2011).

to exert pressure on fellow members in cases of default. One woman described a case in which she and her fellow borrowers were encouraged by their loan officer to beat another member who had fallen behind in her payments. Reflecting on this incident, she lamented, 'I learned from this incident that it would be better to starve than to miss a single payment.' As dynamics of social dispossession, these disciplining practices can be understood as 'technologies of subjection,' tools which both complement and foster developmentalist visions of Third World entrepreneurialism and market incorporation (Ong, 2006).

The overwhelming narrative from women in Arampur about the experience of taking microcredit loans is one of social isolation and ostracism. Pressure from field workers to abide strict weekly loan repayment schedules is relentless. One woman described this harassment from field workers, 'they used shocking language. They threatened to blindfold and kidnap me, and called me a "bad woman." I said, "I have paid installments regularly for three years. Wouldn't you consider only one day or two?" I asked them not to use such abusive language with me, don't they themselves have mothers and sisters?' As this woman's testimony exemplifies, failure to make loan payments is regularly met with verbal abuse. In some cases, this abuse is physical or even sexual. In at least four cases, women described either being sexually assaulted by their loan officer, or being pressured by their loan officer to have sex with him as a consequence of non-payment.

It would be easy to dismiss such stories as examples of corrupt practices of a few isolated MFI staff members. On the contrary, these abuses should be read as a systemic concern related to the pressure placed on loan officers by MFIs to maintain high repayment rates. Despite overwhelming patterns of borrower abuse, many respondents expressed sympathy for loan officers, who they said would lose their jobs if high repayment rates weren't upheld. These systemic concerns are echoed by Ahmad, whose research with NGO field workers in Bangladesh suggests that loans officers' work is marked by job insecurity and extreme structural constraints on their ability to provide flexibility to borrowers no matter the conditions they face (Ahmad, 2003).

Moreover, both the inability to repay loans as well as the act of leaving the house to earn money to repay loans are regularly met with ridicule and harassment from neighbors and other community members. The pressure to take and repay loans with limited earning capacity is described by women as extremely isolating. Testimonies of women borrowers are infused with painful stories of abuse, such as the following:

This is how microcredit hurts us, like, when you go to the office to pay the installments, they make you wait 3 or 4 hours, and then when you go back home, your husband beats you, and then he says 'you slut, there's no food for me to eat and you went to pay money to your other "husband." Does he fuck you?' And then your children are crying at home, what will you feed them with? And if you feed them, there's no money to repay the loan! This is all women's burden, and this is their problem. Women face trouble from every direction, there's no food to eat, no clothes to wear, no oil for your hair. Where do you go? There is no peace.

This account, which is illustrative of the distress expressed by the stories of women respondents in Arampur, offers insight into the subordination of women through the disciplining mechanisms of development and resulting social dispossession. Their stories resonate with other historical accounts of the subordination of women through the expansion of capitalism, notably Maria Mies and Silvia Federici's descriptions of the persecution of women as 'witches' during the transition to capitalism (Federici, 2004; Mies, 1986).

Even under extreme conditions of dispossession that result in seasonal urban migration, it is often only men who move to cities, leaving women in the village to manage the increasingly difficult tasks of social reproduction. Many female respondents discussed the vulnerability and sense of helplessness they experienced under their new responsibilities for making loan payments without earning opportunities or capacity for subsistence. One borrower explained, 'I found it hard to pay the loan installments. My husband lived away from the village leaving me in trouble, as work was not available in the village. I found it difficult to eat and feed the children. We ate once in two days. We had to starve the remaining time.' The links between migration and microcredit are not unique to Arampur, as other scholars have highlighted (Bylander, 2014; Bylander and Hamilton, 2015; Duffy-Tumasz, 2009; Ovesen and Trankell, 2014). Anthropologist David Stoll has raised similar concerns in his study of the dispossession of female microcredit borrowers in Guatemala who struggled to repay loans used to finance the migration of male family members to the United States (Stoll, 2013). In such contexts, social dispossession may be the primary means through which women borrowers experience dispossession through microcredit.

Borrowers in Arampur described the deep reconfiguration of their social lives through microcredit. One borrower ominously explains,

Those who haven't taken loans are happier than those who have. Life is a hell for those who have taken loans and can't earn enough to repay them. Many can neither pay installments nor buy food. Life is worse than hell for them. We have to come up with money for the installments even if we must starve to do so. The NGO workers will rush to your house as soon as the sun rises. They come for the money one after another. It's as if someone had died and they came to mourn them.

This description is reminiscent of Marx's discussion of the alienation of labor in *Capital* (Marx, 1992). Drawing our attention to the dynamics of social dispossession, this testimony demonstrates how a household- and village-level examination of dispossession through microcredit can shed light on the variety of transformations (both material and social) taking place under the contemporary development project. It speaks to both Roy's discussion of poverty as the new frontier of capitalism (2010) and Elyachar's suggestion of culture as a new terrain of accumulation (2002).

#### 4.2. Development as dispossession

The structure of microcredit programs as well as the metrics used to determine their success illuminate logics of social dispossession via transformed rural livelihoods. Imperatives to maintain high repayment rates and evaluative tools based on social capital theory (Fine, 2010; Maclean, 2010; Rankin, 2002) both shape and are shaped by a developmentalist imaginary in which intensification of commodity relations is categorically positive and off-farm employment is the ideal.<sup>12</sup> The lack of support of microcredit programs for smallholder agriculture is apparent in the repayment structure, which requires borrowers to begin making payments on their loans immediately the week after borrowing. This structure is common to every major NGO microcredit program in Bangladesh.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> One World Bank study highlights these goals through its evaluation of microcredit in relation to its contributions to rural non-farm industrialization (Khandker, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting here that Bangladesh Krishi Bank, a government-owned agricultural lending bank, does offer large agricultural loans to relatively wealthy landowners in this area. However, they do not lend agricultural loans to sharecroppers or very small landholders. Respondents mentioned Krishi Bank only as an example of their exclusion from formal credit programs conducive to borrowing for agricultural purposes.

Moreover, Malcolm Harper has argued that the lending instruments used by MFIs may be incompatible with lending to small farmers for a number of reasons, in particular the small margin between MFI interest rates and farmers' own financial returns from agriculture. Harper explains that this incompatibility is unlikely to be overcome without changes in farming practices; in particular, the adoption of Green Revolution farming technologies, such as the intensification of fertilizer use and high-yield variety seeds (Harper, 2007).

The MFI ideal of off-farm employment is not lost on borrowers, who lament that an alternative loan repayment structure offering a grace period between planting and harvesting would facilitate agricultural investment, and perhaps even give some landless borrowers the opportunity to purchase their own land and transition out of day labor and sharecropping. Despite this apparent opportunity for microcredit programs to create the conditions for more equitable agrarian class relations, such an outcome is far from the reality of borrowers' experiences in Arampur. This failure might be seen as indicative of the role of microcredit in promoting a particular vision of rural development in Bangladesh more broadly, and the imperatives of a variety of forms of dispossession and agrarian transition therein.

Rhetoric of microcredit as a development panacea for the Global South is thus linked with the normalization of capitalism as self-evident and inevitable. However, insight from Arampur reveals resistance to the compulsion of capital. Borrowers describe alternative visions from the development they have experienced, and disappointment with the results of the present paradigm.<sup>14</sup> One borrower explains,

When the NGOs first came to the village, they said their loans would bring happiness to our lives, as we would get money to start businesses. They lured us by saying we would have chickens, latrines, and many other things. We believed them. They said we would have to repay the loan in installments every week and it would not be painful. But later, we saw that it was painful. We understood that we could not be freed from the grip of loans even after selling our own skin.

This borrower's testimony recalls Marx's description of primitive accumulation in Volume I of *Capital*, in which he describes class differentiation under capitalism from the perspective of those who "finally had nothing to sell except their own skins" (Marx, 1992). The testimony simultaneously reveals a particular logic of agrarian transformation through development, even as it helps us to see that microcredit borrowers are not necessarily always and already fully incorporated into relations of dispossession, and that they are able to identify and narrate an alternative trajectory that operates outside of this paradigm. That borrowers in Arampur do not see the process of their own incorporation into the market via microcredit as natural and inevitable thus indicates an important rupture in development teleologies articulated by microcredit and rural development agencies in Bangladesh.

It should come as no surprise, then, that these forms of dispossession promoted by microcredit agencies are accompanied by and linked with a range of other programs that are more commonly recognized as tools of capital accumulation in rural communities. Specifically, MFI investment in commercial agricultural technology results in a process of agrarian dispossession simultaneous to the dispossession generated through microcredit. As Jack Kloppenburg argues, the proliferation and intensification of commercial agricultural technologies are among the most serious modes of accumulation by dispossession in rural communities today (Kloppenburg,

1988, 2010). Leading microcredit NGOs in Bangladesh are at the forefront of the movement toward industrial agriculture and food production. Marketing of GM and hybrid seeds through microcredit programs is common. BRAC (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), the world's largest NGO, is Bangladesh's leading distributor of hybrid seeds (Tutu, 2007; Zaman, 2006). The Grameen Bank, amidst pressure from social movements, was forced to abandon plans for a joint venture with Monsanto to distribute the company's seeds and fertilizers through microcredit programs (RAFI, 1998). Subsequently, in cooperation with Groupe Danone, which is among the ten largest agro-food TNCs in the world (Weis, 2007), Grameen developed a 'social business' enterprise to produce and sell yogurt fortified with imported ingredients to poor Bangladeshis. Of the enterprise, a representative of Danone explained, 'this is not about charity for us. This is about business and building our brand' (John, 2011). Other 'social business' ventures undertaken by Grameen include the privatization and sale of drinking water in rural communities and 'Grameen Knitwear,' which operates a garment factory in an export processing zone outside of Dhaka, and which drew media attention in 2011 when workers held a strike to protest low wages, as well as dozens of other independent and joint ventures ('Grameen Knitwear Closed,' 2011). Examining microcredit programming alongside a variety of development interventions in Bangladesh thus reveals dispossession through multiple levels and processes, collectively bolstered by the rhetoric of aid and empowerment for the poor.<sup>15</sup>

What this discussion highlights is that microcredit is not just one example of, but is in fact deeply intertwined with a broad range of development interventions which result in dispossession in rural communities in Bangladesh. While industrial development and resource extraction are more commonly recognized as a drivers of rural dispossession (Chowdhury, 2016; Gardner, 2012), microcredit is in fact closely linked with these dynamics. Social dispossession through microcredit is a critical component of a broader process of rural dispossession driving Bangladesh's model of neoliberal growth.

## 5. Conclusion

Though microcredit once enjoyed 'silver bullet' status in development rhetoric and policy circles, in the years since this field work was conducted in 2007, the public face of microcredit has become tarnished by international media coverage of farmer suicides, MFI abuse scandals, and the threatened collapse of lending agencies due to widespread borrower default (Hulme and Maitrot, 2014; Polgreen and Bajaj, 2010). Even Yunus himself has joined in the chorus of 'microcredit in crisis', deriding those MFIs which he blames for commercializing the sector, a move which he called in a New York Times op-ed 'a terrible wrong turn for microfinance' (Yunus, 2011). The sense of crisis has in no small part been precipitated by reports of a suicide epidemic in India brought on by usurious microcredit activities (Taylor, 2011), and reports from Bangladesh of desperate microcredit borrowers selling organs in attempts to settle mounting debts (BBC, 2013). This new

<sup>14</sup> For a deeper exploration of resistance to microcredit and the development model it embodies, see Paprocki (forthcoming), which examines Nijera Kori, Bangladesh's largest grassroots social movement, its rejection of microcredit, and the political alternatives it proposes in rural communities throughout the country.

<sup>15</sup> Examining the relationship between microcredit and these affiliated programs also suggests important avenues for linking the dynamics of social dispossession with capital accumulation. To give a sense of the profits being generated by microcredit and other "social businesses," in 2013, BRAC released its annual report with celebratory claims of 'robust growth,' with an income of approximately US\$525 million in the previous year, over US\$190 million of which represents earnings from microcredit borrowers' interest payments, and over US \$50 million of which represents revenues from commercial agriculture projects ('Robust growth for BRAC,' 2013). Anu Muhammad has also documented the expansion of finance capital via microcredit lending by the Grameen Bank (Muhammad, 2009, 2015). For more on these linkages between MFIs and the formal financial system, see Taylor (2012).



discourse has resulted in what Roy, citing Achille Mbembe, calls microcredit's "necropolitics," where "becoming subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death" (Roy, 2012).

Even as dispossession through microcredit is apparently intensifying, testimonies from borrowers in Arampur provide a trenchant critique of these processes. They suggest important ways of identifying dynamics of dispossession that are less legible through standard metrics used by development agencies, and of gaining a fuller understanding of the potential impacts of microcredit on agrarian change in Bangladesh and beyond.

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