Women Empowerment in Bangladesh
A Study of the Village Pay Phone Program

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Abstract

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The purpose with this study is to find out how the mobile phone and the Village Pay Phone from Grameen Telecom have been implemented into women’s life in rural Bangladesh. It also aims to study how the women have become empowered by this program. The sample constitutes sixteen female owners. A purposeful cluster sampling was used to depict six villages from various parts of Bangladesh. When arriving in the villages a snowball sampling method was used to find female VPP owners. The sampling method was chosen to include a sample of various characteristics. The study has a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which aims to find out how the women experience the VPP and what meaning the women put in it. To collect empirical data interviews with open questions were used that opened up for conversation and the possibility to understand a range of experiences and nuances of meanings. The findings indicate that the majority of the women handed over the VPP to their husband or a male relative. The reason why is the families' pressure on them to adjust to Purdah and seclusion, too much domestic work, lack of education, or because of the attitude among men and women both that business is a male domain. The study shows that women mostly gained some prestige. Also, they got a greater self-esteem to meet strangers since the VPP made them meet more people. But it has also brought quarrels and broken some friendships. All women are now more able to call family and relatives when they needed or wanted to and said that they have full access to use the mobile phone for this purpose. Still many are put in a dependency relation to others as they need help to use it. The women, however, are no longer owners of a status symbol because the mobile phone is more available for others today, but they are still known by name. Their homes do no longer attract visitors as it once did during the initiation of the program. There has also been a significant decrease in demand for the VPP that has lessened the income much and some have become even poorer from the VPP and women seldom benefitted personally from the profit. A few of the women mentioned that the family atmosphere had improved but most of them did not say that they had gained influence in the family as a result of the VPP.

Keywords: Development, Women Empowerment, Gender, Mobile Phone, VPP, Bangladesh
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1 Introduction

The diffusion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has come to play a major part in development programs around the world. Among them, the mobile phone have been used in various such programs, to combat poverty and give the people a chance to join the new information society that is widely spoken of and experienced in Western societies. But there is a tendency of being too optimistic about technology and believe that by simply implementing a certain technology certain outcomes will be noticed. People use mobile phones in different ways, for different purposes and in different contexts. Hence people will benefit differently from such a device.

Grameen Telecom is one ICT development program, initiated in Bangladesh and repeated in African countries also (Scheen, T., 2008). It aims to diffuse the advantages of the mobile phone to rural people that have no other access to telecommunication services and thus include them in combating their poverty. The program targets women to become owners of a mobile phone and start a small enterprise by renting it to others, and is said to change the power relations among men and women.

This study will portray sixteen women’s experiences of this program to give the reader an insight in how the mobile phone has been implemented in the women’s life and how the mobile phone have empowered them. To find out these aspects is beneficial in succeeding ICT development programs to increase the women’s chances to benefit from such programs in the future.

2 Background

The study is carried out in Bangladesh, which once constituted a part of Pakistan, but won a nine-months war of independence in 1971. The country has developed rapidly the past ten years, but is still one of the world’s least developed countries (SIDA, 2007, November, 5). The land area of Bangladesh is only a third of Sweden and comprises a beautiful country side covered with a river network, and a hill area covering the far-east part of the country. In 2007 the population reached 147 million which makes it the world’s eight densest populated country having 996.8 people per square kilometer. In 2000 about 48.9% of the population is women. Muslims make up 88.3 % of the population and Hindus 10.5 %. (SIDA, 2007, November, 5; Landguiden, 2008, May, 7). 82.8% of the population lives on less than 2 dollar a day and 25 % of the population is considered extreme poor. Approximately 75% of the people live in the rural areas of Bangladesh (Landguiden, 2008, May, 7).
2.1 Women in Bangladesh

Women in Bangladesh are in many ways inferior to and dependent on men from early childhood. When the girl reaches puberty her marriage will soon be arranged and the family will pay the husband’s family a dowry to marry off their daughter to him. The girl will thereafter pursue the rules of Purdah and live under seclusion. Women that can obtain Purdah strictly show high social status. Only very poor women have to go outside to work (Hartman & Boyce, 1998). Violence against women is common in Bangladesh (SIDA, 2007, November, 5). Even if the constitution promotes equal rights to women, women still suffer from discrimination and violence that occurs in the home, at the workplace and on the society level as well (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2008). The women in rural Bangladesh are hard working. Foremost, they perform heavy household work throughout the days. Women’s contribution to the family income is not recognized to the same extent as men’s, but they are however involved in many activities, such as post harvest activities, farming, fuel gathering, rice husking, making and selling handicrafts, and rearing domestic animals (Islam, undated). “A woman’s work is never done”, a village woman says in the study of Hartman and Boyce (1998: 86). Although women’s work is hard and time-consuming, such work does not provide them equal status to men. A woman seldom earns money on her own, but is financially dependent on her father, then husband and thereafter her son for economic security (Hartman, Boyce, 1998). Only one third of the women in Bangladesh can read or write, but the school attendance have increased since the past decade. To improve the literacy and education level among girls and women the school fee is removed for girls the first ten years in school, twice as many years as for boys, because the families often are reluctant to pay for their daughter’s education (Landguiden, 2008, May, 7). Women, however, constitute only 22% of the university students in Bangladesh (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2008).

2.2 Telecommunications in Bangladesh

The mobile phone sector developed rapidly during the past twenty years. In 1980, when the state-owned BTTB (Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board) was the only telephone service provider, demands on interconnectedness from the population were seldom met. The process of getting a landline telephone could take years and become exceedingly costly (Yusuf, A.M., & Alam, Q., 2007). In 1990 about 0.21% of the Bangladeshi people owned a fixed line telephone (United Nations Statistics, 2007, August, 16) As the mobile phone services developed the Bangladesh government opened up the sector for private sector competition. The mobile phone soon came to replace the fixed line telephone since it enabled interconnection in various parts of Bangladesh where fixed line networks had been impossible to establish. The first mobile services were made accessible by the private company Pacific Bangladesh Telecom in Bangladesh in 1993. As Grameen Phone Limited, Aktel and Banglalink entered the market the cost of the mobile phone services decreased immensely during 1997 and 2004 (Yusuf, A.M., & Alam, Q., 2007). In Bangladesh the number of cellular subscribers increased from 0.06% 1998 to 13.25% in 2006 (United Nations Statistics, 2007, August, 16). The project of the Grameen Phone Ltd has contributed to diffuse the mobile phone service among rural people of Bangladesh as well, by introducing the Village Pay Phones to these areas.
2.3 Initiation of the Village Pay Phones

The Village Pay Phones are operated by villagers living in rural areas of Bangladesh. The operator receives a loan from the Grameen Bank (GB) to purchase a mobile phone from Grameen Telecom (GT) and she rents it to other villagers. GT is a non-profit organization that holds a 35% share of the Grameen Phone Limited (GP), which has a nationwide license for GSM 900 mobile service in Bangladesh. In that way GT can provide the operators of the Village Pay Phones mobile connection (Cohen, 2001).

As a result of renting the mobile phone to other villagers, people in these areas of Bangladesh will also have access to telephone services. It enables the rural people to connect to the rest of the world, and thereby also new opportunities to combat their poverty. In addition, the operators will obtain an additional source of income (Cohen, 2001). To become a Village Pay Phone operator, the women have to be a member of GB and have a good repayment record. GT uses GB’s lists of loan recipients to find the operators. She should also have an income generating business already, and enough spare time to run the VPP. At least one of her family members should be literate (Grameen Telecom, 2006, August, 21). The idea of the VPP program was introduced to the Grameen Bank in 1994 by Iqbal Quadir (Cohen, 2001).

The Grameen Bank, of which all VPP owners are a members, was initiated by Professor Muhammad Yunus, and gives women micro-loans they can use to incept a small business. She could invest in a cow, for example. By selling milk to villagers she earns money and can repay the loan. Consequently, she provides milk to other people; while she is running her own income generating business and makes a living (Quadir, I., 2006, October). To do this the women have to form groups of five, of which two women receive a loan. All women in a group are responsible for the repayment of the loan and if they repay the loan successfully the other group members have access to a loan to. The bank provides the services in 96 % of all villages in Bangladesh. About 90- 95% of the micro-credit receivers pay back their loans (Cohen, 2001). Professor Yunus was rewarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for combating poverty through the micro-credit program. Quadir’s idea was to use GB’s the list of loan-receivers and replace the cow with a mobile phone. Hence, the great focus on women as owners and operators of the VPP.

Professor Yunus explains the focus on women as following: “[...] I wanted to ensure that poor, illiterate women had an option for financial resources”, Professor Yunus says in an interview (Abdus & Shetty, 2006:73). In the same interview he also says that he believes “women are good managers of money” (p. 73). He says that they spend money for long term benefits, and share these with the rest of the family. In this way the Grameen Bank is unique as they focus on women’s participation and access for loans; it has 7.41 million borrowers, of which 97 % are women (Grameen Bank, 2008, April, 20).

In 2007, the Village Pay Phones have been established in over 50 000 villages, in 61 of 64 districts of Bangladesh the total number of VPPs had exceeded 297,079 (Grameen Bank, 2007, July, 31).
2.4 Goals of the Grameen Bank and the Village Pay Phones

Both Grameen Bank and Grameen Telecom try to combat socio-economic development problem from below. Iqubal Quadir, the founder of Grameen Phone, says in a speech that sustainable economic development is “of the people by the people and for the people”. He explains that by empowering the poor people to become active in the process of development and less dependent of financial aid, one could achieve a sustainable development (Quadir, I., 2006, October).

Both of these projects also promotes women empowerment. Yunus says that the income will give the women authority and confidence when handling money. They will also develop leadership abilities, and gain power as she access material gain (Abdus & Shetty, 2006). As the women must join group to receive loans the women will develop leadership-abilities and become accounted for, both individually as they need to collaborate within the group for further loans (Grameen Bank, 2008, March, 18). In addition, Quadir include that “[a] woman with a mobile becomes important in a village. This changes power distribution” (Twist, J., 2005, July, 13).

2.5 Users’ benefits from the VPP

The impacts of the VPP among the users are frequently studied, and the reported impacts of the VPP have been considered positive for the users in a VPP village. According to Bayes, who use statistics from 1998, the mobile phone is said to have made positive changes in a few aspects: the social equilibrium, the empowerment of disadvantages, the kinship networks, and the law and order situation. By using the phone, people are now able to meet the markets’ demand and supply it with proper goods to a fair prize. Instead of trusting middlemen they can use the phone to find out actual prices. The number of months people in villages with a VPP could eat well has increased. Furthermore, the mobile phone was very useful during disasters. It enables the people to contact or warn relatives in areas of disasters. The people also believe that the law and order have improved, since they from now on can report burglary and theft more easily. The mobile phone has also made it easier to contact health service. The access to a mobile phone also made the villagers able to maintain frequent contact with family members located in other areas better (Bayes, A., 2001). About 3 million Bangladeshis work and live abroad to support their family financially. By using a mobile phone no middleman is needed to make transactions of the husband’s income. Using the mobile phone facilitate contact with their husband and make transactions in privacy, which is easier by using the mobile phone since most people in rural areas are illiterate and used to need help to write letters (Aminuzzaman et al., 2002). VPP users also save money indirectly by using the mobile phone, alternative options to contact someone are to travel to the person in question or to send someone else to meet him or her, which is more expensive and time-consuming as the villager has little possibility to assure that the person is available when he arrives (Bayes, A., 2001). Women made about 30 % of the mobile calls while men made 70 % of the mobile calls, which indicate gender differences in use and access to the mobile phone. Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) explains that for female users the mobile phone where of great importance in order to keep contact with friends and family far from where they lived, and to make safe transactions from the husband’s earning.
3 VPP and women empowerment

Focus also has been directed towards the VPP owners to find how VPP operators become empowered by the VPP (Bayes, A., 2001; Richardson, et al., 2000; Aminuzzaman et al., 2002).

Bayes (2001) study describes six ways in which the female VPP operator becomes empowered. Information was gathered through interviews with VPP operators. To begin with, Bayes finds that the VPP operators perceived themselves to be freer to move around in the village. For incoming calls the women had to deliver the phone to the receiver of the call, if no one else in the family was available to do it. Sometimes the telephone was needed during night time. If the phone was located in the shop or small market, the women had to go to the phone every time it was needed. He acknowledges that additional membership in Grameen Bank and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) might have helped women to come out of the household and take part in income-generating businesses, but that such membership mostly confines the women to conduct their business in their homes. He also found that women could meet relatives outside the village more easily now since they could use the mobile phone to contact the family and tell about her arrival. In that way conflicts could be reduced. Secondly, the women found themselves less dependent on others’ financial support than before, since they could earn money on their own now. Instead, people that had supported them with money were now using the telephone services. Thirdly, the mobile phone also made the women rather famous, they reported. The mobile phone had become a symbol of status, and she became known among the villagers either by name, or as their bari (house). An increased household standard contributed to her fame also. Also, some women said that they had been invited to social happenings such as weddings, because of her work as a VPP operator. Moreover, the women’s social capital increased too. When people came to use the mobile phone she also came to meet people of the village and know much about them. This made her a part of the news elite. Finally, the women’s knowledge increased also, as she often overhear the conversation. In that way she could learn about others businesses, unknown places and new people.

Richardson, et al. (2000) noticed that the use of the mobile phone was highly integrated in the woman’s everyday life, and that she mostly brings the mobile with her when doing other businesses or household work. Also the husband, son and daughter were proud of having a mobile phone, and knowledge of how to use it.

In addition to these findings, Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) found alterations within the VPP operators’ lives that are similar to the ones Bayes (2001) mentioned. The study showed that 95 % of the owners in the sample increased their income because of the VPP. The longer they had operated the VPP the larger the income. In many cases, in which the owner did not operate the VPP, she took a percentage of the income generated by the VPP. 96 % found their social network widened as a result of the VPP, and that they had gotten to know more people. The mobile also come with prestige and power to the owner. The prestige was not rooted in the business itself but in the ownership of the mobile phone. Hence, women that owned the VPP but did not operate it also said that the VPP improved their social prestige. The owners mostly became known as Phone Bari (house with a phone) or Phone Bibi (lady with a phone). It is of value to mention that 60% of the owners reported that, because of the VPP, people respected them more. 39% of the sample states that they have become known as a person with many references. The study also reports that over 70% of the users stated that they now are considered as a source of information, and that they became involved in business transaction. Still, they state that in spite of these changes the VPP operators’ life had not changed much.
Statistics show that men to a large extent become VPP operators (Bayes, A., 2001; Richardson, et al., 2000; Aminuzzaman et. al., 2002).

In the study conducted by Richardson, et al. (2000), 43 VPPs in southern parts of Bangladesh were surveyed of which, 10 of the VPP operators were men. Five of these VPPs were located in one district (Chittagong district) and the other five in one single thana1 (Singhar thana, Manikganj District). Richardson et al. explain this as a result of different approaches to management within these areas, and stronger traditional values about gender roles there. They find it essential to make the VPP available for both men and women to operate as women in their study tend to use the mobile phone when a woman operates it only. The study conducted by Bayes (2001) in 1998, states that 55% of the VPPs were not operated by the owners themselves. 50 % were instead operated by the owner’s husband, son or daughter and another 5 % by someone else. Hence, women operated only 45% of the VPPs. The sample included 50 owners and was taken from 50 different villages close to Dhaka. It included 60% of the VPP owners during the time of the study. Aminuzzaman et. al. (2002), report that only 4 % of the VPPs in his sample where run by a woman. 96% of the VPPs were operated by male family members. In 40% of the cases the VPP was operated by the female owner’s husband. The study included 85 operators from 20 different locations.

During our survey instrument pre-testing visits to villages, in one case we witnessed where a VP was supposed to be operated by a woman but were in her husband’s control at his village store. In this case, it was difficult not to see the obvious indicators of the location of the high gain antenna and the fact that the phone never left the man’s hands. When asked if she could tell us the international dialing code for Saudi Arabia, a number that every other VP operator could tell us instantly, the woman was only able to answer after being prompted by her husband. (Richardson, et al., 2000: 32)

Richardson, et al. (2000) also refer to other studies that investigates whether the woman have to be in control of the micro-loan or not in order to become empowered. They refer to studies that indicate that in some cases, in which the husband was in control of the loan, indebtedness and family violence was common. They had not found studies on if there were any such differences in empowerment if the woman was the operator of the VPP or not. Such studies would be rewarding when finding the impact of the VPP program, they say.

3.1 The VPP in Bangladesh – entering the field

The Village Pay Phone project that started in 1997 is today somewhat outdated. Today many people own or have access to a mobile phone in Bangladesh. Since other mobile phone companies has entered the market the prices has decreased much and made the mobile phone more affordable for the people of the country. Some operators of the VPP have bought another mobile phone from other companies than Grameen Telecom, by which they rent mobile phone service to others. When visiting the villages one can hear the mobile phones ringing and beeping here and there.

1 Bangladesh that is divided into over 400 thanas, administrative districts that have one police station each (Hartman & Boyce, 1998)
3.2 Studying women empowerment

Naila Kabeer (2001) has conducted a study on women empowerment and micro-credits in which she also discusses why studies come up with different answers to whether micro-credit membership empowers women or not. Kabeer explains the contrasting answers as a result of studying empowerment as a linear process, of methodology and the view of women as a homogenous group.

To begin with, Kabeer (2001) argues that empowerment should not be studied as a linear process in which causes and effects that make an underpowered woman empowered are detected. Instead empowerment is a multidimensional process on many levels, where causes and effects are not easily distinguished. Therefore, it is not of much use to apply quantitative methods in such studies, which conforms empowerment to one or a few indicators that might not be valid in all cases. Kabeer points out that it can be difficult to know “when a change is a cause and when effect” (p. 81). What empowers one woman, may not empower another, or empower both in different ways. Thus she does not consider women a homogenous group but a group of individuals and empowerment as a subjective experience, because women respond to various opportunities in different ways. Therefore, women empowerment should be studied from the women’s point of view, by listening to their personal experiences, referring to their understanding of reality. In her qualitative study of women empowerment, she finds out that an opportunity to move more freely in the village is not always perceived as a positive thing among some women. One of the women explains why she decides to stay home “[w]omen who can eat by staying within the home are given greater value” (p.69).

However, Kabeer (2001) does not neglect that a quantitative study is useful when finding the magnitude or range of experiences among the women.

4 Purpose of the study

To begin with, most of the women that own a VPP do not operate it herself, but hand it over her husband, son or other male relative. Quadir’s intention of the VPP program was to ensure the rural people access to the VPP, but the female VPP owners are limited to operate the business for some reasons. Women also tend to use the mobile phone only when it is operated by a woman. These findings emphasize the importance of investigating what have influenced the women’s tendency to hand the VPP over to a male operator and what role the female owners play.

The studies showed various ratios of male and female operators in the sample. They are conducted during the same period but cover different areas of Bangladesh. Bayes’ study (2001) was conducted close to Dhaka. Richard, Ramirez and Haq (2000) covered the southern parts of Bangladesh and Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) covered villages from “20 different locations” (p. 6). There is need for a study that covers a greater variety of districts in Bangladesh to find various situations in which the VPP is operated.

Earlier studies indicate that the VPP operators have become empowered by the program and agree upon many aspects (Bayes, 2001; Aminuzzaman et al., 2002). But in spite of the findings Aminuzzaman et al. concludes that the VPP generally does not alter the operator’s life drastically. The studies were conducted in the very beginning of the 21st century and since then the mobile phone has become highly diffused among the people in rural areas. Aspects of women’s empowerment might also have changed.
Earlier studies of women empowerment are both qualitative and quantitative, but put too little focus on female owners of the VPP as individuals in different contexts. Hence, this study approaches the field from a different angle than earlier studies in accordance to Kabeer’s advices. In this way focus is on empowerment among individuals. To bring qualitative result from earlier studies further, this study will put focus on describing empowerment while referring to its context and letting the women’s experiences prevail the study.

The purpose of the study is to find out what is influencing the way the VPP is implemented in the women’s everyday life, and how the VPP alter the life of the women concerning empowerment. Empowerment will be studied as a relational and motivational construct that include both power redistribution in relationships and achieving the motivation to influence. The study will approach the field following Kabeer’s advice of how to study women empowerment, and aims for an understanding of how female owners of the VPP have experienced this program and what meaning they put in the VPP.

### 4.1 Research questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study the following questions are framed to be answered.

- What aspects of the women’s everyday life affect the women’s access and use of the mobile phone and the VPP?
- What characteristics of the mobile phone affect the women’s access and use of the mobile phone and the VPP?
- What benefits and restraint have the women experienced from the VPP and the mobile phone?

The questions framed above allow the VPP to be studied in two levels of meaning. The first two questions aim to find out the women’s use and access of the mobile phone and the VPP. They refer to how the mobile phone is implemented in the women’s everyday life and aim to describe how the characteristics of the VPP and the female owners affect the women’s use of and access to it. That is the manifest meaning of the object. The third question opens up for deeper meanings to be found of the mobile phone and the VPP among these women. That is the latent meaning. By finding out what opportunities and restraints it came with, one can understand what it means to the women’s world to have a mobile phone. One can also find out if the women have become empowered by the VPP, through matching the women’s experiences of benefits and restraints with theories of empowerment.

### 5 Theory

In the following chapter the theoretical framework used in the study will be outlined. The theoretical framework involves the Digital Divide, Technology Society & Culture, Gender & Technology, Technology as Capability Enhancement, Gender & Development and Empowerment.
5.1 Digital divide

As the new media has become available, it has brought a range of benefits to its users, developers and designers. It enables people to accelerate the pace of life and makes information reachable for people while making distance irrelevant for people to communicate, discuss or share knowledge (Westlund, 2007). But according to Gurumurthy (2004, September) everyone does not benefit from the new media and the information society. She explains further that control lies in the hands of large corporations and in the structures of power relations between rich and poor countries. It also lies in power relations between corporations, groups and individuals. The digital divide refers to the uneven distribution of ICT among countries, corporations and people as well as the uneven distribution of its benefits. Women in general and poor rural women in particular, constitute one socio-economic group that draws little benefit from the new ICT.

5.2 Technology, society and culture

Technology in this study is regarded as both an effect and cause of social and cultural systems. Here technology is not considered to have a direct impact on culture, but constitutes one of many factors that collectively effect culture. Also, culture and social structures contributes to and establish ideas for the development and use of new technology. Effects of technology is only apparent when technology is implemented into a social and cultural context. In that way, the social and cultural context shapes technology. Society and culture should be treated in relation to each other since they are different but however closely interrelated. While community refers to social and institutional customs and personal habits as symbolic expressions of meanings, society refers to economic and political assets and power as well as social relations such as communities and family and social roles regulated by formal and informal norms (McQuail, 2000).

In contrast, technology determinists state that the technology has a predetermined impact on societies. Mostly other variables that could have caused a social change are neglected as the influence of technology is emphasized. Research based on technological determinism tries to find turning points in history as a result of new communication inventions such as the printing machine, telephone, and the internet (McQuail, 2000). It was thus viewed as autonomous, with outcomes that organizations societies and individuals had no control of. This approach neglects the effect society and culture may have on the shaping, and implementing technology (Williams and Edge, 1996).

5.3 Gender and technology

In order to let women in to the technological sphere, the socially constructed norms have to be replaced to favour women participation in the technology domain. Within this perspective gender norms in a society and culture that can have an impact on the technological development and their use and vice versa are searched for. Here it is important that both men and women participate in shaping technology everyday.
Grill and Grint (1995) discuss technology as masculine culture. This theory criticises the idea that women are excluded from technology because they relate to the world differently from men. Instead women are excluded because the technological domain has been constructed as masculine culture through historical as well as cultural factors. In that way, technology is closely associated to the male character. By analysing (historical) events one seeks to find out how those changes have shaped the culture of technology and masculinity/femininity. Some refers to the gender division of labour when finding reasons for technology as a male domain. Men dominating public and high skilled work areas producing technology for men, rejecting female membership in certain domains of production, development, and use of technology. It is the socially and culturally constructed ideas of what technology is and by whom it is used and developed by that shape technology to a male dominated domain. Capitalist technology is considered more masculine than others. As capitalism was introduced the asymmetrical gender power relations within that domain, were transferred to capitalist technology.

Technology is also seen as a symbol, and the use of certain technology, or the ownership of technology have become a symbol for masculinity. Grill and Grint quote Cockburn when they explain that gender is more what you do than what you are. Based on this assumption, they explain that the women tend to choose not to use technology as it interferes with their femininity. In order to make technology more attractive to women, the culture of technology as a masculine artefact for men has to be changed. (Grint and Grill, 1995)

5.4 Technology as capability enhancement

Development theory has emerged from a focus on the diffusion of information and goods (technology) aiming for a social change within developing countries, to a focus on capability enhancement among individuals. Development is now considered “the expansion of people’s capabilities” (p. 17) which is fulfilled by the process of reduction of conditions that limit people to make full use of their potentials. This approach is bottom-top oriented so that marginalized people’s needs are met to enable them to become active participants in the development process. From this point of view technology can only be of value if its services meet the needs of the participants. Also, social and cultural factors as well as demographic characteristics of the user should not limit participants’ ability use it if it is to be considered valuable (Shina, 1995).

The axioms of technology for capability enhancement are that access to technology increases the opportunity to enhance capability of the individual and that the opportunity depends on the interaction of the characteristics of the technology, the characteristics of the participants as well as the needs of the participant. As a result, four policies are mentioned:

- Technology services should be diffused so that all participants have access to it.
- The characteristics of the technology should be identified, as well as how these characteristics may influence the participants’ access and use of it.
- Identify how the characteristic of the participants’ influence their access and use of the technology.
- How telecommunications satisfy the needs of participants of different characteristics.
5.5 Gender and Development

Development has also become engendered, beginning with the emphasis on women participation in development program to then put focus to gender creating the framework of Gender And Development (GAD) in the 1980’s. GAD came to adress gender as a social construction and stress the importance of changing social and political power distributions among men and women in order to combat inequality. GAD came to emphasize heterogeneity among women, shift focus from needs to rights, and integrated men and masculinities into GAD. Wilkins (Hemer, et al., 2005) also writes that one has become more aware of gender dynamics within development processes during the past decades. She states that in order to give women equal opportunities to participate in development processes previously directed to men, it is important to be aware of patriarchal and power systems in which the development process is implemented. The third development goal of the World Bank is to “promote gender equality and empower women – as a central component to its overall mission to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth” (World Bank, undated).

5.6 Empowerment

Empowerment is constructed on basis that there is an unequal distribution of power among people which results in peoples experiences of power or powerlessness. There are different sources of power. For example: personality, organizational, and property, wealth, and class. (Lord & Hutchison, 1993). The study is based on the following two definitions of empowerment.

5.6.1 Empowerment as a relational construct

The first consider power over someone: empowerment as a relational construct. This creates a dependency or interdependency relationship between people and is relationally constructed. When a person’s performance outcome is dependent on others actions or responses, he or she is subordinated to the others. People in power are able to make decisions or take actions that favor their own need and/or desire. Empowerment is when the diversity of power is redistributed and decreased. In this sense, to empower is to delegate sources of power to people. (Conger & Kanungo, 1988)

5.6.2 Empowerment as motivational construct

On the other hand, one must not take for granted that empowerment is the same as delegation, participation and resource sharing. Conger and Kanungo (1988) describe the second definition of empowerment: empowerment as motivational construct, which argues for an urge among people for power and the ability to influence and control other people. The need for power is met when the person perceives that she has power over, or can cope with, situations, events or people and experience a feeling of self-determination. Such feelings stems from the sense of self-worth or personal usefulness. Powerlessness is sensed, Lord and Hutchison (1993) write, when a person does not think that his/her actions will have any influence on their own or others decision. From this perspective, empowerment is to enable or motivate people.
6 Methodology

This study is a Minor Field Study partly financed by SIDA. It is conducted during two months in Bangladesh 21 Feb - 10 April in 2008. The study has a qualitative approach, and does not aim for generalization or to measure empowerment. It aims to bring to light some women’s experiences of the VPP, and not to generalize the result to all Bangladeshi women in rural areas. Such studies can be carried out in complementary quantitative and qualitative studies. The experiences studied are only those that the woman is conscious about; unexpected outcomes are not included since other methods of collecting data are needed for studying such phenomenon.

The theory used is the one of capability enhancement, but as a result of the method chosen and, the limited range and timeline of the study no causal relations between access/use and empowerment are studied. Rather the theory is used to focus on the various aspects of the process of capability enhancement from a phenomenological hermeneutic point of view and intend to outline their characteristics. In that way the social and personal characteristics of the women is outlined as well as the characteristics of the technology and their access to and use of the mobile phone and the VPP. The findings are discussed on basis of theory on technology as shaped by and shaping society and culture, technological determinism, and gender and technology. Empowerment is referred to as a need, thus the women’s experiences are discussed in relation to theories on empowerment. As a result the purpose of the study will be fulfilled.

6.1 Hermeneutic phenomenology

The underlying philosophy of the thesis is that of a hermeneutic phenomenology. The theory explains that people interpret objects, and that an object can be interpreted differently by different people since they take part in varying situations. An interpreted object is a phenomenon. The approach is used when studying people’s interpretation of objects in order to find out the objects character. A hermeneutic phenomenologist also strives to find the latent meaning of the phenomenon. That is, the phenomenon is not only what is observed but also what meaning we put in it and how it becomes a metaphor for something in a bigger context, the person’s unique lifeworld (Bjurwill, C., 1995).

6.2 Data collection

In this chapter the methods for sampling as well as the sample are described respectively. Thereafter the choice of interviews is motivated and the construction of the interview guide is explained.
6.2.1 Method for sampling

As the aim is to obtain a range of experiences and meanings put in the VPP by the women, a purposive cluster sampling was made among villages of various characteristics in Bangladesh. As other studies have shown diversity in experiences among the areas of Bangladesh, it is important to include women from various parts of Bangladesh in this study. When arriving to the villages of the sample, a snowball method was used to find the female VPP owners. The snowballing was mainly in the interpreter’s control, as he knew the language and how to contact people in the villages. To carry out a good sampling, the purpose of the study and the sampling methods was thoroughly discussed with the interpreter before entering the field.

6.2.2 Sample

The sample for interviews constitutes sixteen respondents of which all are female owners of a VPP, in villages of Bangladesh. The female owners may or may not be the operator of the VPP. The sample will include women that have owned the mobile phone for a long time as well as women that have recently obtained it. Women that once have owned a VPP from the Grameen Telecom but not anymore are also included, in order to get a picture of how the meaning of the VPP might have changed during the past years. Women of various ages, religion, family situations, locations, occupations and NGO experiences were included. (See Appendix 1) The villages are chosen to represent various parts of Bangladesh. Interviews are made with people from villages in areas around: Sitakunda (Chittagong), Feni, Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Gazipur, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Bagerhat. (See Appendix 2)

6.2.3 Interviews

Interviews were used to reach an understanding of the women’s experiences of the VPP and what meaning it bore to them. Interviews are a suitable method to reach an understanding of someone’s lifeworld, as Dahlberg et al. (2008: 83) explains:

“Language, its statements, expressions, concepts and words can never be meaningfully separated from its existential roots. Words have in themselves a hermeneutic function; they help bring the phenomenon that we are investigating into light.”

Interviews make a delicate situation in which mutual confidence should be inspired (Larsson, 2004). During the interviews a male interpreter from Chittagong University translated the interviews. The fact that interpreter is male and that both the interpreter and the interviewer were considered to be of rather high social status the respondents might have become reluctant to freely express their experiences and give answers they think are expected. The interviews were however held in the women’s homes in some privacy to make them feel as comfortable as possible in the interview situation. The purpose of the study and the research’s independency from NGOs or companies were explained also in order to acquire their trust.

2 The interpreter is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Journalism at Chittagong University in Bangladesh
6.2.4 Construction of the interview guide

Open questions are employed to open up for a conversation with the respondent, to reveal their unique experiences of the Village Pay Phone program, and to not limit the range of answers and areas covered to the theoretical framework and false pre-understanding. To achieve a full picture of the respondent’s experiences the answers are followed up by additional spontaneous questions depending on the respondents answer.

The interview guide is divided into three parts which explores the phenomenon from different views. The first part of the interview guide aims to outline how the VPP have been implemented in the women’s everyday life and why. It defines her access and use of the VPP and what meanings it bears for her to operate it. It is essential as earlier studies indicate that it might affect the women’s opportunities to experience empowerment. The second part of the interview aims to outline in what ways the introduction of the VPP and the mobile phone may have altered the women’s life. By following up their answers, an understanding of how she might have responded to the changes can be reached. To define empowerment as experiences of benefits, restraints and changes is a starting point in finding out their experiences of the VPP and classify them as positive or negative. Benefits facilitate certain aspect of the woman’s life and restraint might be overcome by the woman in one way or another or not at all. All and all they have altered the conditions of the women’s life of which some might be explained in a way that indicate that she has obtained new abilities or sources of power. In the beginning of the second part of the interview the questions open up for her to tell about the benefits and restraint that are closest to her. The following questions are more specific (as they concern social, family and individual aspects) to make the respondent reflect upon these aspects also, as earlier studies mention changes within these aspects. The third part was used to collect personal data about the respondents, such as level of education, age, NGO participation and when the VPP was operated. (See Appendix 3) The telephone numbers and membership identity of the respondents were collected when possible for further contact with the respondents and to demonstrate the authenticity of the information gathered from the interviews.

Before finalizing the interview guide three test interviews were made. Thereafter, the orders of questions were changed, and follow up questions made in order to encourage further reflections of the VPP among the women. The interview guide is reviewed by a person who shares the culture of the sample to give suggestions for improvements. Inappropriate questions were removed or reframed. To limit the risk of hasty conclusions the first respondent was asked further questions that had arisen along the other interviews. The first respondent had a good analytical ability, and was therefore interviewed once more to give a more profound understanding of the phenomena and confirm or decline the new ideas. (See Appendix 4)

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3 Telephone numbers and membership identities are not attached because of ethical considerations, but kept by the author of this text.
6.2.5 Data analysis

The interviews have been recorded to store as much information as possible so full attention could be directed to the respondent. The interviews are carefully listened to and each interview is written down as detailed reviews and frames the experiences told by the respondents. The interpreter checked the review so that no misunderstandings between him and the researcher had occurred. The language was rather poor during the interviews, so therefore no detailed transcriptions of them were made, as it was considered not fruitful. Instead the reviews are carefully written in order to maintain the respondents’ stories the way they are told as much as possible. To make the text more readable, word order and grammar are corrected by the interviewer. Comments on the interviews are put between brackets. Quotations are written in italics and are arranged to first person singular where the interpreter has not been consistent. When needed, grammar and word order is corrected by the interviewer here too. The second interview with Jostana Akhter is put together with the first interview with her as they complement each other.

6.2.6 The Hermeneutic Rule

The reviews of all interviews are read through altogether to achieve good idea of what the texts comprises. Then every interview is read in detail. The details are then related to the whole again until no contradictory component was found between the whole and its parts, but generated and understanding of “the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole” as Dahlberg et al. (2008: 237) put it.

6.3 Methodological demarcations

There are many practical aspects to consider when entering a field that is much different form one’s own. It is of importance to gain plenty of knowledge about the field before entering it, in order to remove practical problems or to choose more suitable approaches or methods of data collection (SIDA, 2008, January, 17-18). Still problems may arise during the conduct of the study, which has to be reflected upon. Before entering the field much information about it was collected from books, articles and people that had conducted studies within this field. A preparatory course arranged by SIDA was attended in order to discuss eventual problems that could be in the field (SIDA, 2008, January, 17-18). When conducting a study from a hermeneutic phenomenological approach understanding is what is strived for. Within this study problems arose that are of great importance to reflect upon in order to find out how they might have affected opportunity to understand the lifeworld of the sample. The chapter will show how these problems have been dealt with and why certain decisions were made. The major problems that caused confusion were pre-understanding, a lack of immediacy during the interview and language skills. The sampling method will also be discussed.
6.4 Pre-understanding

In a book by Gadamer (referred to by Dahlberg et al., 2008: 138) they write: “Without pre-understanding [...] there can be no understanding”. In that way all preunderstanding before approaching a phenomena cannot and should not be abandoned. Rather there should be an awareness of pre-understandings when entering the field, to reduce the risk for letting false pre-understanding create misunderstanding. This can be a problem when entering a unknown field and culture. But it could also be an advantage as essences that might be taken for granted by a people living in that culture will be noticed easier (Aspers, 2007). Dahlberg et al. (2008) writes that by being “observant, attentive and sensitive to the world of experience” (p. 121) one can overcome this problem. That is she let “things themselves present themselves” (p. 122), and try to be open to all possible presentations and pay attention to new ways of understanding things. The study will follow the phenomenon sensitively and be alert on every new dimension and ways of understanding it (Dahlberg, 2008).

To increase my understanding of the field, I seeked to engage myself to the people’s life in rural and urban Bangladesh. I tried to learn their culture and social norms, as much as possible. I lived with a Bangladeshi family in Chittagong during my stay and visited their native village and family and friends living there. To bridle one’s pre-understanding is important as it cannot be removed fully (Dahlberg et al., 2008) To bridle my pre-understanding further I discussed informally about the cultural differences between Sweden and Bangladesh, with people of the country and with people visiting the country. During my stay the interpreter was also my informant to some extent (Aspers, 2007), who introduced me to the field and whom I could ask questions to about the Bangladeshi culture and the respondents of the study. I decided to analyse and present the results of the interviews after coming back to Sweden, in order to achieve distance to and reflect over my experiences of Bangladesh and the way I interacted with the respondents. For this I used a diary in which I wrote down self-reflections and thoughts about my experiences during the visit. Concerning time limits and other practical boundaries I would say that I gained much knowledge about the people in Bangladesh in order to conduct my study satisfactory, but I am aware of that my knowledge can always increase as well as my awareness of my pre-understanding. On the basis of the conditions under which the study was conducted, I had the possibility to bridle my pre-understanding to a reasonable extent. The study aspires to outline an understanding of how they experienced the VPP and how these experiences have empowered the women.
6.5 Communication difficulties

It is of great importance to be aware of the advantages of the language but also the limitations, when we are communicating and seeking understanding for respondents’ lifeworlds (Dahlberg et al., 2008). A Bangladeshi interpreter was needed to translate the interview into English. As a result, the meaning of the respondents’ questions was reduced to the limits of the interpreters and my skills in the English language and misunderstandings occurred now and then, which hampered the conversation and was time-consuming to solve. Also, confusion between the words he and she made the data collection more difficult, since it was of great importance to separate men and women’s interpretations and actions in this study, and created additional misunderstandings. An understanding of the respondents’ lifeworlds is dependent on meaningful conversations with the respondents and a common language (Dahlberg, 2008). As the interview was supposed to be similar to a conversation there were spontaneous follow up questions that the interpreter had to translate instantaneously, which made the translating process more difficult. A sufficient skill in English is needed to reduce misunderstandings and construct detailed and tone sensitive interpretations of the women’s explanations that a hermeneutic phenomenological approach need.

To avoid these problems fully is not possible as there is always an interpretation of information before we understand what we see. In an effort to reduce such problems various student were invited to interpret the interviews, but did not enhance the quality to a great extent. As a final check for misunderstandings the interview reviews were verified by the interpreter also for a final check for misunderstandings. The interviews gather data about the respondents’ lifeworld so that an analysis could be made although there is more data to be gathered.

To increase the reliability further triangulation should have been cared for, which ensures that the questions were correctly interpreted. By letting the interpreter who’s mother tongue is Bengali and second language English translate the English questions into Bengali, and let an English native speaker that also know Bengali translate the guide back into English, the first and last result can be compared and contrasted to each other and dissimilarities found. Also, as the interview included follow up questions they should have been transcribed and translated by a second interpreter to outline how these questions have been translated to the respondents. In that way a more profound understanding of how the respondents reflected over the questions could have been reached as well as an understanding for the meaning put in the VPP among the respondents.
6.6 Immediacy
As I was new to interviews and that an interpreter was needed slowed down the conversation. The immediacy needed was then not developed in the interviews to make the interviewees able to tell their whole story and reflect upon their experiences. As Kabeer states that empowerment is a non-linear process that is individual where it is difficult to know when a change is a cause or an effect, the study is to a large extent dependent on the respondent to depict them. Hence, by using this method the study relies on that the women are aware of the phenomena, or that the interview open up for them to reflect upon it. To find out about such relations was difficult with most women because of the low immediacy quality of the interviews. Greater experience of conducting interviews could have developed the conversation further by capturing and follow up aspects of interest and develop them further by fruitful questions. According to Dahlberg et al. (2008) immediacy would generate reflection and a more profound understanding of the meaning women put in the VPP.

6.7 The interview guide
The questions in the interview guide are not about empowerment directly but about changes that are explained by the respondents in a way that indicates empowerment or not. This widens the range of possible changes as there need to be changes before someone can become empowered. Further questions about how these changes have been experienced and how it might have altered the women’s life are asked. Aspects of empowerment are found by relating the essence of these experiences to theory of empowerment. This strategy might miss many aspects of empowerment, as the questions are too open. The women needed more guidance when thinking about the matter, a higher degree of immediacy and more specific questions might have been useful. However more specific questions would have guided the women too much. The balance is delicate but as the aim was to find new aspects of empowerment the questions was made as open as possible.
6.8 Sampling

The sampling method might not have generated a sample that includes all different types of ownerships and ways of operating the VPP. As owners of the mobile phone were looked for around the market place in the village it was not likely to find a female operator of the VPP as they rarely go there. The opportunity to find women that operated the mobile phone from their house in more remote areas was also limited as we started our search for respondents in the central part of the village. It would have been too time consuming to search for respondents in other ways as the areas visited were new for the researcher and the time too short for searching for respondents in their homes. Searching for VPP owners in the village could also bring women that operated the VPP from their homes to the sample, as guidance to female operators was asked for when arriving at the villages. But it is less likely to be guided to them as the others are more close at hand. As a result of using the snowballing method, it was more likely to find female owners of the VPP that are well known in the area and easy to talk to, in areas that are more or less accessible. The biases mentioned, explained by Chambers (1986), decrease the opportunity to see people that are less influential and living in more remote areas. Women that operate the VPP from the home may experience the VPP differently as their situation or way of operating the VPP is different. Interviewing these women would generate an interesting additional study, in which other sampling methods could be used and other networks of female operators could have been found. The sample still includes women of various characteristics living in different regions of Bangladesh and thus supports the intent of gathering a varied sample for the study. The sample was not intended to represent all VPP owners in Bangladesh but to show a varied extent of experiences related to the program.

6.9 General comment

This approach was chosen as it enables the study to highlight personal experiences and to discover what meanings women put in the phenomena. Despite the limitations this approach comes with and the practical circumstances that come with the field, it is important to try to understand how people within the field perceive aspects of their everyday life. Understanding is built up since it is a process based on communication and develops by time and interaction between people. This study is a step towards the understanding of these women’s lifeworld, and does in spite of the limitations give an insight to what meaning the women put in the VPP.

7 Results

To begin with the text will outline how the women experience their access and use of the mobile phone and the VPP in order to increase the understanding of how the VPP and the mobile phone have been implemented into the women’s everyday lives. The text will also show what characteristics of her, her lifeworld and the technology that has affected the way the mobile phone and the VPP has been implemented. Thereafter, it will be outlined how the mobile phone and the VPP has affected or changed the women’s everyday lives. Texts in italics are quotations from the interview review.
7.1 Women’s use of and access to the VPP

The following chapter will depict reasons why the women hand over the responsibility to operate VPP to their husbands or male relatives. It will also outline in what situations the women operate the VPP and their personal use of the mobile phone, as well as whether they consider the VPP and the mobile phone male domain or not.

7.1.1 Women mostly hand over the VPP to a male operator

Out of sixteen VPPs owned by women, seven VPPs were operated by the owner’s husbands or a male relative. In six families the husband or other male relative operated the VPP receiving help from the owner or sometimes the owner’s daughter. One VPP was mainly operated by the owner and one was operated by the owner only. Most of the women were pleased to let their husbands operate the VPP even though the decision was taken by their husbands or male relatives in seven of the families. In two families the women themselves took the decision to by a VPP. These two women had no husband.

The female owners in this sample had many reasons to hand over the responsibility to operate the VPP to a male relative. The most frequently given reason was seclusion as a result of Purdah. As they are not allowed to stride outside their home, go to the market or invite unknown men to their house, they cannot operate the VPP. If they break these norms they would gain a bad reputation among other people in the village. Two women also say that it is unsafe for women to go outside after dusk. One woman, Dipti Roy, believes that women in general do not wish to operate the VPP because their families do not want the wives to work outside home. Male members put up such restrictions because they do not want a bad reputation among other people about their family members. “If steps are taken against these restrictions, women will be able to start a business”, she says.

Six of the owners said that they did not want to operate the VPP because their domestic work is too time consuming. The lack of time because of too many household chores is an additional reason to why they cannot go outside.

“I am a very hardworking woman and have many children and grand children and I am rearing cows and ducks and grow vegetables. Because of so much work at home I would not be able to run a business from outside the home. Just give me some work in home within two hours I will have it completed” (Rubia Begum)

She understands that men and women have equal rights but she thinks that it is their culture and social norms not to share the domestic chores with her husband. Women are working in the house and men outside. Dipti Roy says that she would operate the VPP if there was no one else to do it. She do not think that she could operate the VPP along her work at BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), which include traveling between villages to collect loan-repayments.

Eight women had attended school for eight to twelve years. Four women had attended one to five years in school. Three women had not been to school. Women with different levels of education, though still low, said that they possessed too low skills to operate the VPP successfully. Rubia Begum explains:
“I never thought I would operate the VPP. As I am an illiterate one, and can’t even count the money: I think it would be a problem for me to run the business. Rather my son and my nephew can do it.” When she was asked if she would operate the VPP if she was taught how to read and count she answered: “I have a son so why should I go and run a business?”. “If I had no one to operate the mobile phone I would not have got it in the first place” […] “It is a matter of headache”.

One woman explains her bad luck as an uneducated:

   I feel nervous, because I am illiterate and in bad luck. If I had gotten education in my childhood my situation would have been better and I could have made myself less poor. I even feel shy in front of the Grameen Phone because I cannot respond to their questions always, and I do not understand what they are talking about sometimes. I feel that I cannot express herself properly. I wish that my understanding level had been higher. (Taposhi)

Three women bought the VPP because a husband son or male relative needed an employment. In that way it was decided on beforehand that the husband would operate the VPP.

   Nothing would have made me operate it. Because my husband had no business before we got the VPP, and he could not have another work but the VPP. I consider it is my task too, but as I do not have time it becomes his duty. (Rahrahmatara)

Most of the women have a husband son or a male relative that owns a shop in the village already, and gives the VPP to them.

   As I am a housewife and cannot run the business from my home, I just handed it over to my husband so he could operate it from the market where many people gather. If I would have taken it in my home hardly any people will come here. (Jostana Akhter)

Three of the respondents believe that business is not for women and therefore handed the VPP over to their husbands. Shamrina says: “He [her husband] decided that business is not a matter of women, so it is not for me. It is rather for my husband to operate it.” Tahmina Begum thinks that it is her husband’s duty to run a business as he is the “guardian of the family”, and since this mobile phone is for business purpose she handed it over to her husband immediately after she got it. “I am a woman I have no plan to take this sort of business”, she add to her explanation.

7.1.2 When women operate the VPP

There are two women that take the main responsibility to operate the VPP.

Papiya Begum decided together with her husband to buy the VPP from Grameen Phone. Papiya started a shop and operated the VPP from there. The shop constitutes a part of her house, which is located near the central part of the village and its school. She decided herself that she needed a mobile phone to keep contact with her family when she moved from their house in Dhaka to her husband’s house in Brahamenbaria. She also thought that the VPP could generate an additional income. When she lived with her parents in Dhaka she had a mobile phone and knew from that period how to use it. Her husband, who is an employed teacher, is responsible for paying the bills for Grameen Bank. It is too far to the Grameen Bank’s office for her to go there because her business I very time-consuming.
Majeda Begum operates the VPP herself most of the time. She operates the VPP from 8am until 2 pm and then goes home to do her domestic chores. At 4pm she goes back to the shop and stays there until sunset. After sunset her son operates the VPP. The VPP, she thought, would bring her son back from an employment as a bus driver. She found the occupation too risky and incepted the VPP business to earn money and bring her son home.

*I have three sons and one married daughter. In 1999 only one of my sons was old enough to work, and he has a farm to spend some time for. So there was no one else in my home that could operate the VPP but me. Also, I feel secure operating the mobile phone as all businesses around my shop are run by my relatives.*

(Majeda Begum)

Her relatives are also her neighbors so she considers that she can leave her children safe at home while working in the shop.

In seven cases the female owners help their husbands or sons to operate the VPP in the evenings when their husbands come home from the shop or when he comes home for lunch and rest. Then the women receive calls and sometimes send their sons to deliver the mobile phone to people who need it. In one additional case, where the owner is incapable of learning how to use the mobile phone, the daughter is responsible for operating it from the house in the evenings. But the son takes the responsibility to deliver the VPP to other houses.

### 7.1.3 Personal use of the mobile phone among men and women

Women and men use the mobile phone for different purposes. In almost all cases, where women used the mobile phone, they called relatives and family in distant places, while the men also used it to enhance their businesses efficiency.

Most women, eleven, used the mobile phone to contact family and relatives that live in distant places. Five women did not know how to use the mobile phone, but let other family members dial the number for them, or receive greetings that they send forward to the woman. In that way they did not find it necessary to learn how to use the mobile phone. They were either not interested in learning how to use it, or they were incapable to because of illiteracy. Three women said that they had no used the mobile phone at all.

* I never use the mobile phone. I do not even know the number. I hand it over to my son to dial the number so I can talk to my relatives. My son discourages me to learn the mobile phone as he will always be available to help me when I need the mobile phone.*  

(Safali)

Dipti is the only woman in the sample that uses a mobile phone in her work. It is useful as she works for BRAC and has to travel much to collect loan repayments from their members in various villages. The mobile phone helps her to keep close contact to her manager and other office staff, as well as her husband when she is traveling. She also uses the mobile phone to call relatives.

The other family members, often men, used the mobile phone to facilitate the operation of other businesses as well. Some of the owner’s husbands worked as tailors, doctors or shopkeepers and could use the mobile phone to contact their patients, customers or for checking prices. Eight of the families had male members that used the mobile phone to enhance their businesses.
7.1.4 The VPP and the mobile phone as a male or female domain

With some respondents the subject of the VPP and the mobile phones as male domains were touched.

The women, who believe that the VPP is for men only, say it is so because women are not allowed to do business or because they are not allowed to go to the market. Taposhi thinks that the mobile phone is for both men and women but the VPP is not.

*Though I cannot operate the mobile phone because of my illiteracy, my daughter can. It proves that it is for both men and women. [...] But operating the VPP in the village is a male task, because women cannot go there.* (Taposhi)

Some women say that the VPP and the mobile phone are for both men and women to operate. Dipti is one of few women in that sample that can explain why she believes so.

*Women can also do this sort of business. [...] Nowadays women are empowered a lot, I have an education, and I never feel inferior to my husband. We are all equal in my family. So it is not a matter of male business only. I can also operate this one.* (Dipti Roy)

*It is not a male task to operate the mobile phone. Women can also do that. During two years back, I know two women who operate the Village Pay Phone from their home, but now they are not available because they handed the mobile phone back to the Grameen Bank. So it is not a male or female matter.* (Safali Begum)

Majeda, who operates the VPP herself, rather believes that “it depends on the borrower’s mentality” if a woman will become an operator.

7.2 Benefit and restraints derived from the VPP among the women

This chapters show how the women explain benefits and restraints derived from the VPP within economic, social, family and individual aspects respectively.

7.2.1 Economic

Many of the operators and owners of the VPP experienced an increased income when initiating the VPP. The income was often spent on the family and invested in other income generating businesses rather than on individuals of the family. In three cases the VPP was bought to get the husband an employment. In one case the female owner of the VPP operated the business by herself to support her family financially. When the VPP was operated in the husbands or other male relatives’ shop it was also used to facilitate the running of this shop. They used the mobile phone to keep contact with customers, co-worker, and patients or to order groceries from the city. In that way the previous business became more effective and income generating. Two of the respondents used the money from the VPP to send one or two of their male family members abroad for work and two respondents used the money to initiate other businesses that still are prosperous. Two of the women used the money to pay for their daughters’ dowry and weddings.
Papiya Begum is the operator of the VPP and uses the income to increase the family’s living standard. She saves some of the profit to purchase new furniture or other household items. She believes that she can continue this business even though the demand has decreased. The mobile phone she rents is not one of Grameen Phones, because it was too expensive, but of Banglalink.

Selina Yasmin is the owner of a VPP but lets her husband and son operate it. She regularly pays deposit money to the Grameen Bank, which is for her to use. She can take loans from this money without paying any interest and use it when needed. She is planning to save money for rebuilding her home. Also, she wishes to buy some land in her own name. In that way her daughter will inherit some of the land, which she must not, according to the law, if the land is owned by her father. Consequently, the daughter would be secured with some money. The increased income also enables the family to have some cash in their house so they do not need to borrow money from friends and neighbors.

None of the women uses the money from the VPP for personal benefits; rather they see the increased income as beneficial for the family and thus also them. “I never bothered about my personal profits. If my son earns some money it would probably benefit my family too”, Rubia Begum says.

All of the owners and operators that have experienced an income from the VPP have also experienced that the VPPs have fallen into decline and thus generate less income for the operators and owners. Rubia Begum says: “Now the mobile phone is so common that even the rickshaw pullers have one. […] Even the fishermen, who barely have any clothes, have one also.”

In some cases the operator cannot specify the profit from the VPP only because it is operated closely with many other sources of income, but they knew that the demand had become less and that their income from the VPP had been reduced. Two operators had not experienced any economical profit from the VPP but rather the opposite. One operator claims that the profit is foremost made by the Grameen Phone, not by the operators. A few of the respondents say that the call rate is too high and have therefore handed back the VPP to the Grameen Bank, and bought a mobile phone from another company such as Banglalink.

One respondent says that in her case it has not been difficult to repay the bills and make the users pay for their calls, but she has talked to others that have had this problem. In this sample most of the respondents had some problems making the users pay for calls but that it did not put them in economic crises. They rarely or never faced any problems paying the bill to the Grameen Bank.

In two cases the VPP have made the people even poorer.

*The Grameen Phone authority imposed us a Nokia 2600 set for 9 000 taka, which we found out that we could have bought for 6 000 taka during the same period. They also took security money 10 000 taka from us, requested 220 taka every month, and additionally 25 taka to collect the bill from the VPP center plus a fee for printing the bill, which were in sum large amounts for us. We could not generate enough income from the VPP to pay all these bills. We feel like we have been cheated to. (Safali Begum’s son)*
We always had to pay too much to the Grameen Bank. When we started the business the first bill for the call rate we calculated was 9,000 taka, but as we went pay Grameen Bank the bill they claimed 13,000 taka. We asked them to correct the mistake but they just referred to the recording system and would not correct the bill. So we became fed up from the very beginning. Therefore we decided to hand it back that soon. (Safali Begum)

7.2.2 Social

Most of the women experienced a positive change in their social relations after receiving the mobile phone even though they did not operate the VPP. Only two women of the sample did not mention any social gains from the VPP, and one woman said that people did not perceive her differently. The other women became prestigious and received attention and respect from others, particularly from women. Some women had never received such respect and prestige before. Rubia Begum explains that the prestige gave her honor and says: it is the best one can get. “Without honor no one respects you”, she added. The owners of the VPP are still well known by name among the villagers in the surrounding areas. Some of the women still experience the increased social network and prestige. As they got the mobile phone, many people came to visit their house to hear about the mobile phone and to use it. Some perceived that their house became a place for gossiping. Taposhi Rani Das, a Hindu woman, said that even Muslim people came to her house to use the mobile phone, which is very uncommon in Bangladesh. Yet they have a very good relationship with the Muslim families.

Two women lost some friendships because their friends could not pay for their phone calls. One of the female operators experienced some quarrel with parents who had teenagers that use the VPP to call their boy or girl friends. She did not find this quarrel a problem of great proportions; she just confirmed to the parent that the VPP is her business and that she rents the phone to people who want to use it

At the beginning many people gathered in my house. As the mobile phone is available everywhere now they do not come to my house anymore, but if I meet them when I go shopping they soon recognize me. However, I believe that the mobile phone have given me the opportunity to meet more people, which I enjoy very much when I go to the market. So I feel better. (Jostana Akhter)

7.2.3 Family

Two of the women felt that their family had become more prestigious and in one family the introduction of the VPP as an income generating source lessened the quarrels between the family members and the owners husband started to treat her better. Six women said that family members respected her more as an owner of an income-generating source and two women gained more power and got their voices heard more often since she got the VPP. Some women did not notice any changes in the family because of the VPP. Parveen Akhtar once asked her husband to hand the phone back to Grameen Phone but he did not agree as he needed it in his shop. She had no decision-making power in that case. “I am just the manager of the house. As a woman I have to sacrifice a lot, they never hear my voice.” But she finds it okay as they are a typical Bengali family.

Safali Begum explains that the VPP was a reason for many quarrels in the family, since the family lost much money from that business.
We have experienced a lot of conflict within the family because of the Village Pay Phone. I have to pay the bill, meanwhile my son or husband claims that they will not continue the business, and by that time I have to pay the bill to Grameen Bank. (Safali Begum)

From the experiences she has got the courage to quarrel with her son, who is the operator, and the power to put the responsibility for paying the bills to the Grameen Bank in her son’s hands.

7.2.4 Individual

All women used the mobile phone to maintain a regular contact with family members and relatives living in distant places. Most of the women that do not know how to use the mobile phone asked another family member to dial the number for them. Other received news about their relatives from their husbands, daughters or sons. Two women found it useful to have a mobile phone in their house because then they did not have to go outside to make phone calls. Instead they could call their relatives from home in privacy. Two of the women felt that they were important for their families since they could provide the family an income and a mobile phone. Parveen Akhter says that after getting the mobile phone she feels proud of being able to generate some income, and now she also feel that she is an important person in the area.

When I had no mobile phone I felt inferior to other people, but when I got the mobile phone I felt that it made me less inferior. Before I considered myself a weak woman because I had no mobile phone and felt shy in front of other people.

(Dipti Roy)

Jostana learned from the Grameen Phone how to operate the VPP. She operated the VPP when her husband came back from his work and was responsible for paying the bill to the bank. She thinks that the VPP has made her rely on her own capabilities as she managed to operate the VPP successfully, and she would like to incept a similar business again. But as the business is not income generating anymore her self-esteem decreased concerning the business, but when it comes to social relationships it increased.

From getting the VPP I learned about the mobile phone system, I also learnt about overseas countries which I had no knowledge of before. I know some overseas countries capitals, people living there and the country code for calling someone in that country.

I also learned to contact strangers. Before, I never opened the door for strangers. But now I invite you. I have knowledge of how to socialize with people I do not know. Also I can travel by myself to the city (Chittagong) since I know how to take help from other people. If you ask me to go to Dhaka I could. And I can use the mobile phone if I need to contact people or find out the address.

I never bother about what people say about me when I go outside. Before I joined the Grameen Bank I felt very shy to go outside and thought it was not wise for a woman do so. But now I understand that their comments do not help me to overcome my problem, so I try to ignore them.
Now women are more conscious about their rights. About one third of all women of our village feels shy and is concerned about other’s criticisms. The rest in our village hardly bother about the criticisms. But it is not a result of Grameen Bank or Grameen phone only, it depends on many things. Education for women is the first one. Now many girls are going to school and have some sort of knowledge from the school of how to behave in society and get some idea of empowerment from the school. Secondly, the media, newspapers and television, have some influence as they inform women of how to behave and about women’s rights. (Jostana Akhter)

No one of the women experience any personal problems arising from the VPP.

8 Discussion

The discussion will firstly deal with how the characteristics of technology or the characteristics of the women and their everyday life have determined the women’s access and use of the mobile phone. Thereafter, the benefits and restraints experienced by the women will be discussed in relation to theories of empowerment.

8.1 Women’s access to the VPP

Of the micro-credit receivers only 3% are said to be men. This minor portion of all micro-credit receivers can be put aside and a general idea that all loan receivers are women can be stipulated. This facilitates a comparison between the samples of previous studies on VPP operators (Bayes, A., 2001; Richardson, et al., 2000; Aminuzzaman et. al., 2002). No quantitative analysis is intended here but a simple comparison to the surprising large extent of male operators. All three studies use a quite large sample of owners, operators and VPP when they find out the number of male and female operators. There are 50, 85, and 43 respondents included respectively. In the first study by Bayes (2001), this is also the first in chronological order conducted in the very beginning of the program in 1998, women constituted 45% of the operators. In the next study conducted by Richardson et al. in 2000, women constituted only 23% of the operators. The study by Aminuzzaman et al. in 2002 included only 4% female operators. It seems like the number of female operators has decreased during the initial years of the program, but could also be a result of where the sample is taken. Bayes and Richardson et al. have concentrated their study to Dhaka and Chittagong district respectively. This study is most comparable with the one of Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) whose sample is, similar to the sample of this study, from areas of various characteristics in Bangladesh. The tendency is clear that the women hand over the VPP to their husband or a male relative which is supported in this study as well. In this study two female operators of sixteen female owners were found.

8.2 The VPP as a social, individual and technological construct

The access and use of the VPP and the mobile phone in the women’s life seem to be determined both by the characteristics of the women’s everyday life as well as their personal characteristic. Also, the characteristics of the mobile phone and the VPP have influence on this.
Women in Bangladesh live their lives in seclusion as a result of Purdah, which hampers them from going to the market where the VPP would be most successfully operated. To work at the market would give them a bad reputation, which the family would suffer from in the future. Therefore many parents and husbands forbid their daughters or wives to go to the market to operate the VPP. Without support from their family the women are not likely to strive for such an occupation. When the VPP is operated from the woman’s house during the evenings and nights, a son or daughter is mostly sent to deliver the phone calls to other families. Women generally do not move around in the village more freely as a result of the VPP, which earlier studies indicate, rather male members do that. However, one woman did operate the VPP from the market, but could do so because she had relatives close that enabled her to leave her children home safe, and that could help her operate the VPP after dusk. As she had no other family member to operate the VPP she took the opportunity to provide her family an income. The other female operator did not have to go outside the house as her shop was placed in it. This points at that in most of the cases the VPP does not change the women’s restrictions to go outside. Instead the women chose to implement the VPP in their life in such a way that it does not interfere with these restrictions. One of the female operators had her husband’s support and the other one had her relatives’ and son’s support to operate the VPP, which usually constituted the primary hinder for the women. None of these women had faced any major problems operating the VPP. Some women are limited to operate the Village Pay Phone because of Purdah meanwhile a few tend to bend the rules of Purdah because of the VPP. However, most women chose not to operate it because of seclusion.

As some women knew men that owned a shop at the market already, they found it convenient to let him operate the VPP for her. A few also handed the mobile phone over to their unemployed husband to give them a possibility to generate some income. Since the respondents and their husbands agree on that more people would use the VPP if it is operated from the market and therefore operate it from there most of the time, it hampers women to become the operator of the VPP as they seldom operate businesses there. No women were found that operated the VPP from their homes. The two women that operate the VPP also do it from a central part of the village, but have support from their relatives or husbands. It shows that the VPP have been placed in a domain (business at the market) that is for men, and that it has been done so both by men and the female owners. As many women agree that business and the market is for men, it seems to limit the women’s access to and use of the VPP. Also, the mobile phone is considered useful to enhance the efficiency of other businesses as well. As men often are the operators of such businesses, the mobile phone seem to fall in men’s hands from the very beginning, as they sometimes ask their wives to buy one for them. The owners rarely expect any other benefits than enhancing the previous business, which in the Bangladeshi society is male-dominated. Some women would not think of being involved in such income generating activities and believe that it is not for women to do that. In that way it appear to fulfill its purpose better in the hands of the men than of these women; women do not need it for business enhancement as no women said that they used it for that purpose. It is rather facilitating the men’s businesses and empowering men.
Moreover, women in Bangladesh are working hard and throughout the days in their homes, which leaves them little time and strength left to operate the VPP. For many women it would be unreasonable much work to carry out. Domestic chores and child caring are not handed over to the men when they are too heavy. Therefore they hand the VPP over to their husbands’ and help them to operate it when the men rest at home. In this way the wife can still manage time for her domestic work. The women that operated the VPP themselves were responsible for the domestic work as well, but could combine both tasks. Dipti’s employment at BRAC differs from the other women’s as she works outside the home in addition to her domestic chores. In this way the wife can still manage time for her domestic work. The women that operated the VPP themselves were responsible for the domestic work as well, but could combine both tasks.

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Some women could not operate the mobile phone because of illiteracy or inability to count. In Bangladesh parents do not prioritize girls’ education as they prioritize boys’, and therefore the women’s access to operate the VPP is limited. Education may not be sufficient to make the women operate the VPP, since the women of the sample who did not operate the VPP was well educated. However, it is necessary for being able to do business and consequently gain access to operate the VPP. The female operators had attended school for five or twelve years. If they would have operated the VPP without such education was not discussed during the interview, but it would be useful to investigate further how education may increase the women’s access to this field.

Concerning the women’s access to the mobile phone for private use, no one of the women found it difficult to get access to the mobile phone, as they always could ask for it or for help to use it when needed. In many cases the women neither show interest nor need to use, or learn to use, the mobile phone at all. For women it is only useful when contacting relatives; men derive additional benefits from the mobile phone as they are operating other businesses on the side. Both men and women have access to the mobile phone, but some women have only a limited access to it because they are not motivated to use or learn how to use it. Also men seem to find more ways of using it than women do. Women do not, however, consider the mobile phone to be for men only. But the fact that some women were not motivated to use it and some not even planned to learn how to use it might indicate that the mobile phone has not been adopted by women to the same extent. Their true access to the mobile phone might also be questioned as a large extent of the sample is dependent on their husbands or other family members to use it. The mobile phone tends to be a male domain mainly in rural Bangladesh.
The VPP does not determine the social norms and everyday lives of the women fully. In spite of the limitations it still opens up for the woman to take the opportunity to use and operate the VPP if she wants to and has the motivation to do it. It is shown that most women did not operate the VPP and the women that did operate the VPP lived in a similar context as those who did not, but had organized their living to make room for the VPP. They also had the educational skills required, time for the domestic work on the side, and care for their children. The women that helped their husbands to operate the VPP did so from their homes or when the husband was taking a rest and hence not available show that social norms have an impact on the women’s access to and use of the VPP. It looks as if it is more difficult for women to enter this area than it is for men. If they has the capability to arrange their everyday life for operating it, and gains their family and relative’s support, it is available to them as it is theirs. They are also needed to bring it to the family. Women who did not operate the VPP were pleased that it was operated by their husband or male relative, but said that they could operate the VPP if there were no one else there to do it. The women did not show any wish to be in more control of the VPP if they did not have to. The lack of motivation to operate it makes them leave the VPP to their husbands or male relatives. In this way, their motivation and personal characteristics are influencing their access and use to the VPP. They need to believe from the beginning that they have the capability to operate such business in order to face the challenge. The results gathered might be biased because of the sampling method used. Snowballing did not facilitate the search for women that operated the VPP from their homes if there are any. Still they show various ways in which the social, individual and technological characteristics influence the women’s access and use of the VPP in situations where women mostly hand over the VPP to their husbands or male relatives. To introduce a mobile phone that figures as a symbol of status and that induces power does not motivate the most of the women to take control over the mobile phone or change their way of living.

8.3 VPP and women empowerment

The aspects of empowerment found in this study will be discussed in relation to theories on empowerment as relational and motivational construct and compared to earlier studies on the VPP and women empowerment.
8.3.1 The VPP owners and mobility

None of the women said that they were able to move around more freely than before as a result of the VPP. After finding out what hampers the woman from operating the VPP this aspect of empowerment, which was mentioned in earlier studies, rather keeps the woman away from operating the VPP. Here the VPP is similar to the micro-credit enterprises mentioned by Bayes (2001) that confines the woman to conduct the business at home. The women do not go outside their homes to operate the VPP rather they operate it to some extent in their house when the husband is at rest. When they need to they send their children to deliver the mobile phone. One woman mentioned that it was easier for her to travel to the city as she had the mobile phone, but that she would not have gone there before she got the self-esteem to disregard others’ criticisms. She had already become empowered enough to go travel there. The mobile phone was a facility when traveling. The mobile phone has been placed in a male dominated area, public business, which is limiting its usefulness for women rather than making them enter the business domain. In this way the traditional gender roles are maintained as the woman keeps herself in the house with domestic chores and the man work outside the house at the market. The VPP delegates the woman a choice to do business at the market, but it does not motivate her to go outside the house or to the market to a larger extent to operate it. Power over a needed technological device is redistributed to the women’s favor but the motivation to face the challenges it may come with is not there for the most of the women.

8.3.2 VPP and social life

Almost all women experienced an increased number of social relations from which they gained respect and honor. The new possibility to meet strangers made them less shy as they learned how they could cope with a situation in which they meet strangers. None of them had experienced any negative effects of the new social relations and they talked about it in a positive way. The VPP gave many of the women a higher self esteem and a prestige that they had not experienced before, even among women that did not operate the VPP themselves. The prestige experienced by the women that did not operate the VPP and the prestige the female operators experienced may take many forms, but are however experienced both among operators and non-operators. The prestige seems to mean much for the women. These experiences support the findings of earlier studies by Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) and Bayes (2001). A few women of the sample perceived themselves in a more positive way now than before gaining this prestige, which is not mentioned in earlier studies. If this prestige had made them feel that they have influence over situations and people, is not revealed by the interviews. Today the women are rather respected as people that brought the mobile phone to the village once, than as the owner of a mobile phone. Their houses do not constitute places for gossiping and gathering as it once did. Their pride has increased since the initiation of the program, but their fame as owners of a mobile phone is not obvious as Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) stated in his study. One female operator, experienced quarrels with people in the village about the use of the VPP, but was not much concerned about them. Also some women experienced difficulties making the users pay for their calls sometimes. Some of the women experienced quarrels with friends over the payment and only a few lost friendships as a result of this, but that it did not trouble them very much.
8.3.3 Ownership and power distribution

Women only could buy a mobile phone from Grameen Telecom and were thus given access to a necessity and power. If their husbands wanted a mobile phone they were dependent on their wife to get one. This dependency has decreased though, as many people can afford to possess a mobile phone in Bangladesh today. The need to buy a mobile phone from the Grameen Telecom by using a loan seem to have declined as other net providing companies has entered the market and lessened the costs. The mobile phone as a source of power is not a privilege for women to the same extent anymore. The mobile phone is quite common today. Neither is it available through the women only any longer, nor is operated by the women that still own them. The women are, in some cases, no longer owners of the mobile phone that is rented to others. (See Appendix 1) The dependency relationship that existed between the wife and the husband does not exist to the same extent as it did during the initiation of the program.

8.3.4 Owner of an income-generating source

From the initiation of the program the VPP generated a good extra income, but as the mobile phone became available to many others the profit declined much. (See Appendix 1) As a result some operators changed from Grameen Telecom to for example Banglalink or Aktel that are competing on the same market. A few families became even poorer because of the VPP. The VPP did not empower the women financially in the majority of the cases, since they rarely mentioned any access to the profit from the VPP. The profit was generally spent on the family as a whole or invested in their husbands’ businesses. In two families the profit was used to pay for the daughter’s dowry which is not considered a tradition that favors women. Some families became less dependent on others since they did not need to borrow money from other more wealthy villagers. The dependency relation, that has been a result of poverty, has become somewhat redistributed. The women themselves were not empowered in this sense; they seemed to think in more collectivistic terms than individualistic. What benefited her family and relatives would probably benefit her too. This does not go in line with Bayes (2001) study that focuses on women’s financial independency to other villagers. Only one of the women mentioned that she used the deposit money derived from the VPP, but none mentioned that they took a percentage of the income it generated as Aminuzzaman et al. (2002) claims. Money as a source of power was not redistributed to the women personally or women in general, rather their families became empowered from the profit. The VPP does not seem to make the women financially independent from male relatives. The study, however, does not reveal if decisions about the family’s economy are made jointly or not. The women’s ownership of the VPP contributed to the family’s income, which the women, who had succeeded in making a profit from it, considered positive. To own a mobile phone that could be used for business increased the women’s self-esteem as it made them feel useful. The additional income and the woman’s ownership of the mobile phone eased up tensions only in a few families, and only a few women experienced that they had got some voice by owning the device. These few women experienced that they had the power to influence others’ decisions. However, many women in the sample do not think that they have a greater possibility influence others after getting the mobile phone. The fact that most of the women did not mention any changes in the family atmosphere at all shows that the VPP had little to do with it. In this way, power distributions as a motivational and relational construct do not seem to have changed as Quadir anticipated in his speech in October 2006.
8.3.5 New knowledge and abilities

As the VPP and the mobile phone was introduced into the women’s everyday life, some experienced new knowledge and abilities. All women said that the mobile phone enabled them to contact their families and relatives more easily. Since women move in to their husband’s house in an early age they might live in areas far from her family sometimes and find it difficult to contact them. Almost all women of the sample had relatives in other areas. (See Appendix 1) Previous studies show that female users of a mobile phone tend to use it to call family and relatives but do not consider it empowerment. However, the women are now more able to determine themselves when to contact their families according to their needs and wishes which points at empowerment as a motivational construct that comes from an increased access to the mobile phone among women in rural areas. As all women mentioned this it seem to be one of the most prevailing ways the mobile phone has empowered them. In spite of this some women are still dependent on other family members that can help them to use the mobile phone. Only few women noticed knowledge and capabilities that they did not think they had before. Foremost, they experienced that they could encounter strangers better now than before as they had met more people, and had gotten used to and learned to cope with such situations. Most of the women experienced the greater extent of social relations in a positive way. Aminuzzaman (2002) and Bayes (2001) do notice that women experience a greater social capital but they do not point out that the women feel more comfortable in such situation because they have experienced them frequently. There were only a few that experienced new knowledge about other places and people that they had not had before. They were very pleased about this knowledge. It would be interesting to find out the outcome of such ability and knowledge. This result tends to correspond with earlier studies about women empowerment, but was not prevalent throughout these interviews. However, there were women within the sample that did experience only minor social benefits or quarrels about the payment of the loans. Some said that they had lost some friendships because of such quarrel. The quarrels were not experienced to be of a great magnitude by many of the respondents that seem to be able to cope with such outcomes. These restraints are also part of the women’s life and might affect their empowerment. It is not mentioned in earlier research but should be discussed in further studies as they might have become sources of empowerment too.

9 Conclusion and Recommendations

Even though the VPP program was directed towards women, men still had the greatest access to operate the VPP and had further purposes to use the mobile phone than the women had. It is clearly shown that the characteristics of the technology, social norms, the everyday work, education and their husband’s employment have an effect on whether she will operate the VPP or not and benefit from the VPP as anticipated.
The women hand the VPP over because Purdah restricts the women from going to the market. The family members expect that the woman keeps herself in seclusion so that the family will not get a bad reputation. To pursue Purdah is a matter of status. The VPP does not let the women move around more freely; rather it is operated by the women in accordance to Purdah. If the woman receives support from the family she will be more likely to break the rules of such seclusion. Moreover, women have continuous heavy work in the household and do not think they have time to go to the market and operate the VPP. Some are also illiterate and are not able to run a business like that. The VPP is also handed over to men because it is more successfully operated where people gather and because men have already established themselves in such areas. Many men do already have a business there, the time to operate it, and the need for it to enhance their previous incepted business. They are also literate enough and have the capability to count, which is required for such a work. All women are now more able to call family and relatives as they have access to the mobile phone, but some women do not have the motivation to learn how to use the mobile phone at all. Yet many women are put in a dependency relation to others as they need help to use it. According to the women it depends on the woman’s mentality if she will become a VPP operator or not. In that case she has to be empowered already before taking the step to operate the VPP. Even though it is given to women they do not have full access to it.

The aspects of empowerment were comparable to the ones mentioned in earlier studies but have changed as the program has developed and the mobile phone been diffused further in Bangladesh. The women’s mobility had not changed; rather such restrictions increased their distance to operate the VPP. For only a few women the mobile phone had made them aware of other places and people. The economical gains did not benefit women individually. The income was spent on the family or other income generating activities and empowered the family. Some families had become even poorer because of the VPP. Today the profit from the VPP is small since the demand has decreased much after additional mobile phone companies have entered the market and lowered the prices. Hence, men are mostly not dependent on their wives any longer to buy one as the prices have been lowered. The women have gained respect in their family but their voices were in general not heard more often because of their ownership of the VPP. Most of the women gained more social relations, and also felt that they had gained some prestige, which seemed to mean much to the women and constitutes the aspect of empowerment that was closest to the women. Although the social gatherings are less now, their self-esteem when meeting strangers has increased. The mobile phone is no longer considered a symbol for status, as it is available for so many people. It does not make her famous as it did before; the people know her by name but her house is not a place for gossiping and social gatherings as it had been when they got the mobile phone. Some quarrels between friends have arisen as a result of the VPP also. The mobile phone, however, enabled women to keep closer contact with their family and relatives, although many of them were dependent on others to use it.

This study shows that empowerment is not a linear process, similar to all women within their families and a direct cause of something. To simply implement a mobile phone in a family’s life does not ensure empowerment of the female owner, nor have they been empowered in the same way. In spite of the limitations of this study the VPP program is found to have empowered the women in some aspects. However, aspect of empowerment did not occur to many women and for some women the change was barely noticeable. Grameen Telecom is one minor source of women empowerment among others in Bangladesh.
This study shows the women’s experiences of empowerment as a result of the VPP program. Technology is however partly a social construct in which men takes an active part also. It is therefore valuable to conduct a study on men’s experiences and thoughts about such a program. It would be helpful to compare and contrast the women and men’s experienced to find out how the different sexes participates and benefits from the program as well as how they might influence each other’s opportunities to become empowered. This would also go in line with the Gender and Development theory that aspire not to study women but gender, which includes both sexes.

To take programs for women empowerment in Bangladesh further it is important to continue to outline power relations among men and women and their possibilities to participate and benefit from it. For future programs to succeed one must understand the women’s lifeworlds so that the change in power distribution and the motivation to influence is accepted by and convenient to the women. What aspects of her lifeworld influence her possibilities to participate and benefit from the program, and what are the needs of the program’s target group? Also, one must follow up the programs as the conditions, under which it is implemented and developed, changes. That is, short term as well as long term benefits and restraints must be considered and followed up.
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Gurumurty, A. (2004, September) *Gender and ICTs overview report* [online] [http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/CEP-ICTs-OR.pdf](http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/CEP-ICTs-OR.pdf)


Verbal Sources
### Appendix 1 - Sample characteristics

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<td>son &amp; nephew</td>
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<td>1999</td>
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<td>10,000+</td>
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<td>Husband can inform</td>
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Appendix 2

Political Map of Bangladesh

*Political Map of Bangladesh (World Site Atlas, 2008).*
Appendix 3

Interview Guide (a)

Implementation of the VPP

When did you get the Village Pay Phone?
Who decided to get the Village Pay Phone?
How is the Village Pay Phone operated?
   By whom is the Village Pay Phone operated?
   Who decides about how to operate it?
   Why is it operated in that way?
   What do you think about the way it is operated?
Would you like to operate it? Why /why not?
Under which circumstances would you operate the VPP?
Do you consider the mobile phone and the VPP a male task to operate?
   Why/Why not?
Do you still have the VPP?
   Why/why not?
What was your monthly income from the start VPP?
What is your monthly income from the VPP now?
   If change, Why?
Did the Grameen Phone give you any reason why you should get the VPP?
   What reason(s)?
   Where they met?
   How/Why not?
   Did the Grameen Phone show you how to operate the mobile phone?
   Did the tell you how to operate the VPP?

Empowerment

Did you expect that the Village Pay Phone would give any opportunities to you personally?
Did you expect that the Village Pay Phone would give any opportunities to your family?
   What kind of opportunities did you think it would bring?
What opportunities did the Village Pay Phone actually bring to you personally?
What opportunities did the Village Pay Phone actually bring to your family?
   If any, in what way did it bring these opportunities?
   If none, why do you think that you could not get any opportunities?
   What do you think about that?

Did you expect that the Village Pay Phone would come with any restraints to you personally?
Did you expect that the Village Pay Phone would come with any restraints to your family?
   If yes, what kind of restraints did you think it would bring?
What kind of restraints did the Village Pay Phone come with to you personally?
What kind of restraints did the Village Pay Phone come with to your family?
   If any, in what way do you find it a restraint?
   What do you think about the restraints?

Do you think that the Village Pay Phone has changed the way other people perceive you?
   If yes, how has the mobile phone contributed to these changes?
   What do you think about these changes?

Do you think that the Village Pay Phone has made any changes the family atmosphere?
    If yes, how has the mobile phone contributed to these changes?
    What do you think about these changes?

Do you think that the introduction of the mobile phone has changed the way you look at yourself?
   If yes, in what way?
   Why/why not?

For what purpose(s) do you personally use the mobile phone?
For what purpose does your family use the mobile phone?
   Does the mobile phone fulfill the purpose?
      If yes, in what way?
      If no, why?

Would you like to be active in similar business today?
   If yes, in what way
   Why/why not?

**Ending Questions**

What is your membership and group number, unity office?

What is your mobile phone number?

What’s your name?

How old are you?

Whom do you live with?

What religion do you belong to?

Do you participate in any NGO activities?
   Which one / Why not?
   How does it affect your life?
   Has the participation of the NGO made you use the mobile phone differently?

Have you been going to school?
   If yes, for how long have you been going to school?

Do you contribute in any other way to the family’s income/ daily work?

How much money do you spend for your family per month?

That was all questions. Is there something you would like to add? Can I meet you again if more questions arise about the subject during the research?

Thank you for your participation!
Appendix 4

Interview Guide (b)

Did you operate the VPP by yourself to begin with?
   How did you operate it?

What made you hand the VPP over to your husband?

Do you think that operating the VPP is a male task?
   Why/Why not?

Do you think it is easier for a man to operate the VPP more successfully than it is for a woman?
   Why/why not?

Do you think it is important that women also operate the VPP?
   Why/why not?

Do you think that the mobile phone is for men only to use?
   Why/why not?

Is it easier for men to use the mobile phone than it is for women?
   Why/why not?

Do women and men use the mobile phone for different purposes?
   If any, what differences?
   If no, why not?

Is it as easy for men as for women to get access to a mobile phone?
   Why/why not?

Do you still attend meetings that Grameen Bank or any other organization put together?
   Why/why not?

You said that everyone has got a mobile phone by now and that people rarely use the VPP. Have your social network changed because as a result of that?

Do you still meet the people that used to come to your house to use the VPP?
   Has your relation with these people changed?
   If yes, what way?

You told us in the last interview that you helped many women to sort out misunderstandings and to arrange visits among your users. How did you feel about helping them in that way?
   Did it cause you any problems to help them?
   Did you benefit from this in any way?

Are you still helping them in similar ways?
   Why/why not?
   How do you feel about that?

Is there any other ways people benefitted from the VPP?

You said that operating the VPP gave you a greater self esteem. Has anything changed since you got a higher self esteem?
You said that you are thinking about getting a flexi load to your old SIM card, have you got one?
   Why/why not?
   Who would make the decision about to get one or not?
   If you get one, who would operate it? Why?
   How would that business be operated? Why in that way?

Do you think that you gained any knowledge or new capabilities from operating the VPP and dealing with all matters about it?
   What kind of knowledge?
   What kind of capabilities?
   How do you use them now?

That was all questions. Is there something you would like to add?

Thank you for your participation once again!