

**Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment in CSR
initiatives within the Bangladesh Garment Industry:
A Comparative Case Study Approach**

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Abstract

Women's empowerment (WE) has become a well-worn rhetoric in development circles. Recently, international fashion brands have also begun to advocate for women's empowerment through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in their global production networks (GPN). Yet, to date, social scientific knowledge on how such programmes are achieved through CSR, and which conceptualization of empowerment they embed within GPNs is underexplored. Through a comparative case study approach, this thesis therefore aims to investigate how women's empowerment programmes are conceptualized in the garment production network of Bangladesh. In theoretical terms, this thesis digs deeper into the dynamics under which the conceptualization of women's empowerment CSR programs in GPNs take place. These relate to the governance of GPNs, power and participation in CSR, labour agency and empowerment as a theory understood from two definitions - a World Bank definition, and a definition advocated by feminist scholars. We find that WE CSR programs in the Bangladesh garment industry have conceptualized women's empowerment in a manner which favours the interests of international fashion brands, and leaves limited space for women workers' voice and participation in CSR, let alone their space to exercise influence via collective actions. Women's empowerment programs conceptualized under these conditions are then obliged to refer to traditional development goals, such as better health, increased income and women's enhanced negotiating power vis-a-vis their employers as evidence of empowerment. These issues however, although framed as win-win, do not alter power relations, and neither do they challenge the status quo. We argue, from the perspective of the origins of the very notion of empowerment itself, that empowerment cannot be bestowed by third parties and is not a destination per se; rather it should make women workers capable of challenging the status quo and the supporting power structures embodied in the system.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; Corporate Social Responsibility; Global Production Network; Bangladesh; Garment Industry

Table of contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Research question.....	7
1.3 Reading Guide.....	8
Chapter 2 - Philosophy and Methods	10
2.1 Philosophy of Science	11
2.2 Research design.....	12
2.3 Case studies design.....	12
2.3.1 Case 1: The Women oriented case.....	13
2.3.2 Case 2: The Consultancy Case	14
2.3.3 Case 3: The dialogue oriented case	14
2.3.4 Case 4: The labour oriented case	15
2.4 Data collection	18
2.4.1 Collection of primary data	19
2.4.2 Collection of secondary data	21
2.5 Data analysis	24
2.6 Data quality	25
Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework	29
3.1 Governance in Global Production Networks	30
3.2 Power and Participation in CSR.....	34
3.3 Labour Agency	38
3.3.1 The importance of trade unions in developing countries	39
3.4 Conceptualization of Women's Empowerment	43
3.4.1 Women empowerment as a CSR project: altering power or perpetuating it? ..	44
3.4.2 Gender as a binary variable or power relations	48
3.4.3 Empowerment an individual process or a collective process?	51
3.4.4 Empowerment as an inside out or an outside in process	53
3.5 Summary of the chapter	56
Chapter 4 - Understanding the Bangladesh Context.....	59
4.1 The Bangladesh garment production network	59
4.2 Trade union bodies	62
Chapter 5 - Empirical Analysis	68
5.1 GPN Governance: Power of the Brand	68
5.2 Power and Participation in CSR: Lack of Women Worker Voices	77

5.3	Labour Agency: Lack of support to Trade Unions	83
5.4	Women's Empowerment	89
5.4.1	The business case.....	90
5.4.2	Empowerment as an inside-out, individual or as a self-direct and collective process 95	
5.5	Summary.....	105
Chapter 6 - Conclusion.....		108
Women's empowerment in CSR: perpetuating power dynamics		108
6.1	Implications for Stakeholders	111
6.2	Implications for Research	113
Chapter 7 - BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		114
Chapter 8 - ANNEX		130

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

<i>Table 1: The Bangladesh Garment Industry in numbers (1990-2015).....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Table 1: Differences and similarities between the cases.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Table 2: Types of interviewees and reasons for inclusion in the study.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Table 3: Overview of (Anonymized) secondary sources</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Table 4: Snapshot of coding.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Table 5: Code names of anonymized interviewees.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Table 6: Empowerment dimension 1.....</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Table 7: Contrasting two empowerment views</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Table 8: Power of the brand in WE CSR projects</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Table 9: Women Worker Voice in WE CSR projects.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Table 10: Support to trade union in WE CSR projects.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Table 11: The business case and WE CSR projects.....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Table 12: WE in WE CSR projects.....</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>Table 13: Summary of findings.....</i>	<i>105</i>

Figures

<i>Figure 1: Methodology overview.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Figure 2 : Theoretical overview.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Figure 3 : Women empowerment as a top down CSR approach.....</i>	<i>57</i>
<i>Figure 4: Costs of a t-shirt manufactured in Bangladesh.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Figure 5 : Logo of implementing Partner.....</i>	<i>93</i>
<i>Figure 6: Workers Representatives Elections Case 4.....</i>	<i>101</i>

Abbreviation

AFWA	Asia Floor Wage Alliance
BoP	Bottom of the Pyramid
BRAC	Building Resources Across Communities
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CMT	Cut-Make-Trim
ETI	Ethical Trading Initiative
HRW	Human Rights Watch
GPN	Global Production Network
GVC	Global Value Chain
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MFI	Multilateral Financial Institutions
MNC	Multi-National Corporation
MSI	Multi-Stakeholder Initiative
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NGWF	National Garment Workers' Federation
PC	Participation Committees
R&D	Research and Design
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
TBI	Transnational Business Initiatives
UN	United Nation
WE	Women Empowerment

Chapter 1

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In the early 1990s, governments in developing countries plunged one by one into the vortex of structural adjustment programmes under the aegis of international institutions (Utting, 2005). The shift in the geographical location of the production of garments subsequently accompanied new waves of outsourcing and offshoring from the North to the global South in which the replenishment of low-cost and less organized industrial labour pool, intertwined with a less competitive domestic market, facilitated a dispersal of production into complex global production networks (GPN) (Coe & Hess, 2008)¹. These networks linked international fashion brand companies in the West to vast networks of suppliers, contractors and workers in developing countries. Subsequently, today, the economic and political forces that structure the global garment industry have come to favour the strongest actors, and this impacts on the global distribution of the industry (Hurley & Miller, 2005). International fashion brands have been criticized for adopting a monopolistic production system in which they persistently organize, dictate and push their network in relation to the pricing, timing and quality of the products into just-in-time deliveries (Ponte & Gibbon, 2005). As a consequence, developing countries face severe economic and social upgrading challenges in relation to inserting themselves in global garment production networks. In this broader context, working in the global garment industry both provide opportunities for women workers to increased earnings and self-confidence, and to strengthen their bargaining power within their households/broader communities. However, it also poses challenges of long hours of repetitive work, meagre payments, occupational health and safety hazards, and threat of sexual harassment and abuse (Azmeah, 2014; Barrientos, 2013, p. 45; Barrientos et al., 2001, 2003; Werner, 2012).

In response to the challenges described above, multinational corporations (MNCs) are increasingly introducing various voluntary self-regulatory initiatives as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR)² agenda in GPNs both to manage their engagement with their stakeholders, and to keep their social ‘license’ to operate (Andersen & Skjoett-Larsen, 2009; Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, p. 10; Grosser & Moon, 2017;

¹ For definition see section 3.1

² For definition see section 3.1

Ingenbleek et al., 2007, p. 539; Pedersen & Andersen, 2006) (cf. Friedman, 2007). More recently, MNCs have also been targeting gender by emphasizing the discourse of women's empowerment (WE) (McCarthy, 2017; Prügl, 2015). Given these governing forces, women's empowerment CSR projects can be said to be conceptualized by private sector brands that are themselves operating in a highly footloose industry – that is an industry not tied to any particular location, and can therefore relocate across different geographical borders (Castree et al., 2016), such as the garment industry.

The garment industry in Bangladesh constitutes a crucial setting in which to apply a feminist lens on this current trend of women's empowerment in CSR initiatives for several reasons. First of all, the country has been working restlessly on ensuring women's overall development, giving them equal and active participation in the mainstream socio-economic activities and (allegedly) removing various impediments to the path towards empowerment (Begum, 2014; Government of the People's' Republic of Bangladesh, 2011). Nationally, the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2015) initiated by the Bangladesh government has placed women's participation in economic and political life as one of the main drivers for women's empowerment (IMF, 2013). Evidently, the country's pro-women policies appear to have paid off: In 2016, the Global Gender Gap Report, which measures the gender gap between women and men in the areas of health, education, economy and politics, placed Bangladesh 72nd among 144 nations. This is a substantial progress from the position it held as number 100 in 2007.

Secondly, with approximately 4,000 garment factories, located in and around industrial clusters in Dhaka, and employing almost four million workers, of whom 85% are women (BGMEA, 2017), women's empowerment CSR initiatives implemented in this industry obviously call for a reassurance of the gender-sensitivity within the policies implemented, especially since prior studies have shown that CSR interventions at the bottom of GPNs have implications for women's empowerment (Bexell, 2012; McCarthy, 2017). This is especially noteworthy since large international fashion brands such as Bestseller, H&M, Levi Strauss and GAP are - particularly after the collapse of Rana Plaza³ (AFL-CIO, 2014; Tripathi, 2014)

³ The collapse of an eight-storey factory, Rana Plaza, near Dhaka in April 2013 caused the deaths of more than 1,100 people and reignited earlier debates about the potentials and limitations of working with CSR in GPNs. The collapse happened despite that leading brands such as Primark declared it safe and compliant with its codes of conduct (AFL/CIO, 2014; Ayrez, 2015; Tripathi, 2014)

- all implementing women's empowerment CSR initiatives in collaboration with international and national NGOs as well as other relevant stakeholders.

The particular focus on women, and women's empowerment in the Bangladesh garment industry has also not emerged by a pure coincidence. Women have indeed played an integral part of Bangladesh's shift towards manufacturing and industrialization (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Since the inception of globalization, the rise of the export-oriented ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh, and the influx of female employment has intensified dramatically (Ahmed, 2004). Today, the RMG industry accounts for 82% of the country's total exports earning (see table 1 beneath), indicating an increase of almost 50% since the 90s. The high number of export has placed the industry on the 'map', and is today the second largest garment supplier in the world after China (Ayres, 2014). Although it is difficult to measure the exact number, the concentration of female workers in the Bangladesh garment industry is estimated to be around 80-85% of the total labour force (ILO, 2013).⁴

However, despite that the garment sector is an important source of employment for women, the question of whether employment leads to empowerment in Bangladesh is somehow nuanced (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2014). Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) for instance revealed that access to work was not sufficient to empower communities and reduce poverty on the long term. Looking at some of the challenges found in the industry itself, it is evident that the majority of garment workers in Bangladesh earn little more than the minimum wage of 5.300 Taka a month (approximately USD\$65.80), far below what is considered, according to the Clean Clothes Campaign (Merk, 2014), a living wage (calculated at 22830.45 Taka a month or approximately USD\$282.73)(Ibid.). The living wage is therefore a shocking 330.75% above what is needed to cover a worker's basic needs, and even further away from a living wage. Some studies however revealed that the garment sector provides better pay compared to many other alternative jobs available to women (Kabeer & Ahmed, 2004). At the same time, it is also argued that the comparatively lower wage of female workers and the assembly-line nature of garment manufacturing are among the main reasons for higher participation of women in this industry (Paul-Majumder & Begum, 2000). Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) also linked women's large-scale employment within the sector to the history of the garment industry itself as a highly feminized form of labour. They found that in the early days it

⁴ It is however difficult to measure the exact number of female workers in this industry, as many of them work in the informal economy without any kind of binding contract (Kabeer, 1997)

became possible to break down the production process into simpler tasks which could be carried out by less and less skilled workers, and hence attracting the cheaper labour of mainly women and girls (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Kabeer (1994) reminds us that Bangladeshi women's work tend to be undervalued in both status and pay (Pearson, 2007), and that the socially constructed "docility and dispensability" (Kabeer, 1994, p. 168) of these women is exactly what makes them attractive to employers. Employers have also been cited as having created "socially acceptable" work for Bangladeshi women (Ahmed, 2004, p. 38). Within similar lines, critics have also pointed that MNCs indeed have a preference for women as they have 'nimble fingers' and capacity to perform tedious and dexterous work, which fits well with the jobs carried out by women workers in the garment industry (Kabeer, 1994). In relation to this, the quality of work affects to what extent women's employment can be considered 'empowering' (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004).

Table 1: The Bangladesh Garment Industry in numbers (1990-2015)

Year Number of garment factories Employment in million workers % of RMG's to total export

1990	759	0,34	32,45
1991	834	0,4	50,47
1992	1163	0,58	59,31
1993	1537	0,8	60,64
1994	1839	0,83	61,4
1995	2182	1,2	64,17
1996	2353	1,29	65,61
1997	2503	1,3	67,93
1998	2726	1,5	73,28
1999	2963	1,5	75,67
2000	3200	1,6	75,61
2001	3480	1,8	75,14
2002	3618	1,8	76,57
2003	3760	2	75,01
2004	3957	2	74,79
2005	4107	2	74,15
2006	4220	2,2	75,06
2007	4490	2,4	75,64
2008	4743	2,8	75,83
2009	4925	3,5	79,33
2010	5063	3,6	77,12
2010	5150	3,6	78,15
2011	5400	4	78,55
2012	5876	4	79,61
2013	4222	4	81,13
2014	4296	4	81,68
2015	4328	4	82,01

Source: Adapted from BGMEA (2017)

It is under the empowering and disempowering duality brought by women's access to garment work in Bangladesh that gender sensitive CSR initiatives came to light and the 'women's empowerment' discourse began to shape MNCs' CSR agenda sourcing from Bangladesh. Indeed, MNCs have commissioned projects that believe in the dual objective of promoting both the economic betterment of business as well as the empowerment of 'poor' Bangladeshi women. This advocates that empowering women workers create win for businesses, and win for women. These programs largely focus on providing trainings and capacity building for women workers on issues related to health, financial management, micro-financing, and sometimes training modules are also intended for male colleagues and supervisors on issues related to violence, sexual abuse as well as safety matters. Other programs focus more on the 'worker' element and on increasing labour's bargaining power *vis-a-vis* *their* employers inside factories. Yet, such corporate driven projects have been heavily criticized by feminist scholars who believes that empowerment is not something that can be done 'unto' people by corporate or international actors (McCarthy, 2017), but is rather a self-directed process for which women have a space to improve their conditions of work, and challenge power relations (Kabeer, 2003; Rowlands, 1998).

For others, empowerment as a corporate bottom up approach is seen to contradict with an emancipatory notion of empowerment that builds on community mobilisation at the local level (Iwagana, 2008; Mayo, 2004). Training modules developed to 'empower' women workers however also created an invisible 'Great Wall' between 'us' and 'them'. As in this narrative of women's empowerment, the training assembles a relationship of power and inequality between the provider (e.g. Western institutions, donors, buyers) and the receivers (women workers). If these training modules are understood not as trainings, but conceptualized as structures of inequality, there seems to be compelling grounds to argue that such actions produce a hierarchy of power where the potentially women beneficiaries do not possess the power or the means to negotiate the terms of the design of these projects (Karim, 2014). The question is therefore, then who possess this power?

Today, such WE CSR projects are also based on a broad-based coalition of different stakeholders, including local implementing partners. Such partners are often said to have context specific knowledge and the ability to enforce the actual implementation of the projects (Morris-Suzuki, 2000). However, since these gender specialists train people in gender-

sensitivity through workshops and flip charts, power point presentations, and videos, which are Western symbols of how knowledge sharing takes place in the first place, makes it highly questionable the extent to which women workers themselves have power and the means to participate on equal grounds in these projects (Karim, 2014), and the extent to which the beneficiaries perceived it as top-down CSR project. In her study of the Bangladesh garment industry, Karim (2014) for instance argued that the outcomes of such projects are often measured in pure numbers - the higher the number, the better outcome is assumed, and better outcome then leads to that women have been empowered (see also Thornhill, 2016). Such methods appear to be favoured rather than in-depth follow-up studies that would allow for evidence on whether gender sensitive training actually changes the behaviour of the participants, and to what extent women have been empowered by facilitating their agency (Ibid.).

1.2 Research question

As we outlined the various challenges and opportunities to empowering women working in the garment sector of Bangladesh, and the rise of the empowerment discourse as part of the CSR agenda, it is fair to conjecture that women's empowerment within CSR is embedded in global forms of governance that may constrain or facilitate empowerment. It therefore becomes relevant to scrutinize the forces governing women's empowerment in the Bangladesh garment sector setting. And when different forms of governance are in place, how does empowerment come out, and how is it conceptualized? In other words, it is our interest to explore the leading factors to a dichotomy between empowerment as a bottom up process and empowerment as top down approach (Iwanaga, 2008). We suggest doing this by determining the extent to which WE CSR in Bangladesh are governed by international fashion brands, and the extent to which WE CSR have conceptualized this role. More specifically, do international fashion brands' governance strategies allow for a bottom-up approach? How is the design of CSR affecting the voice and participation of women workers? What space does labour have to define its own role in relation to negotiating for better conditions at work? And what focus might labour take under these global forces: agency, structural changes or none? To unveil the following interrogations, we suggest fleshing out the concepts surrounding women's empowerment within CSR operating in the Bangladesh GPNs. We therefore raise the following research question,

How is women's empowerment conceived of and conceptualized in CSR projects that aim at empowering women workers in the garment industry of Bangladesh?

1.3 Reading Guide

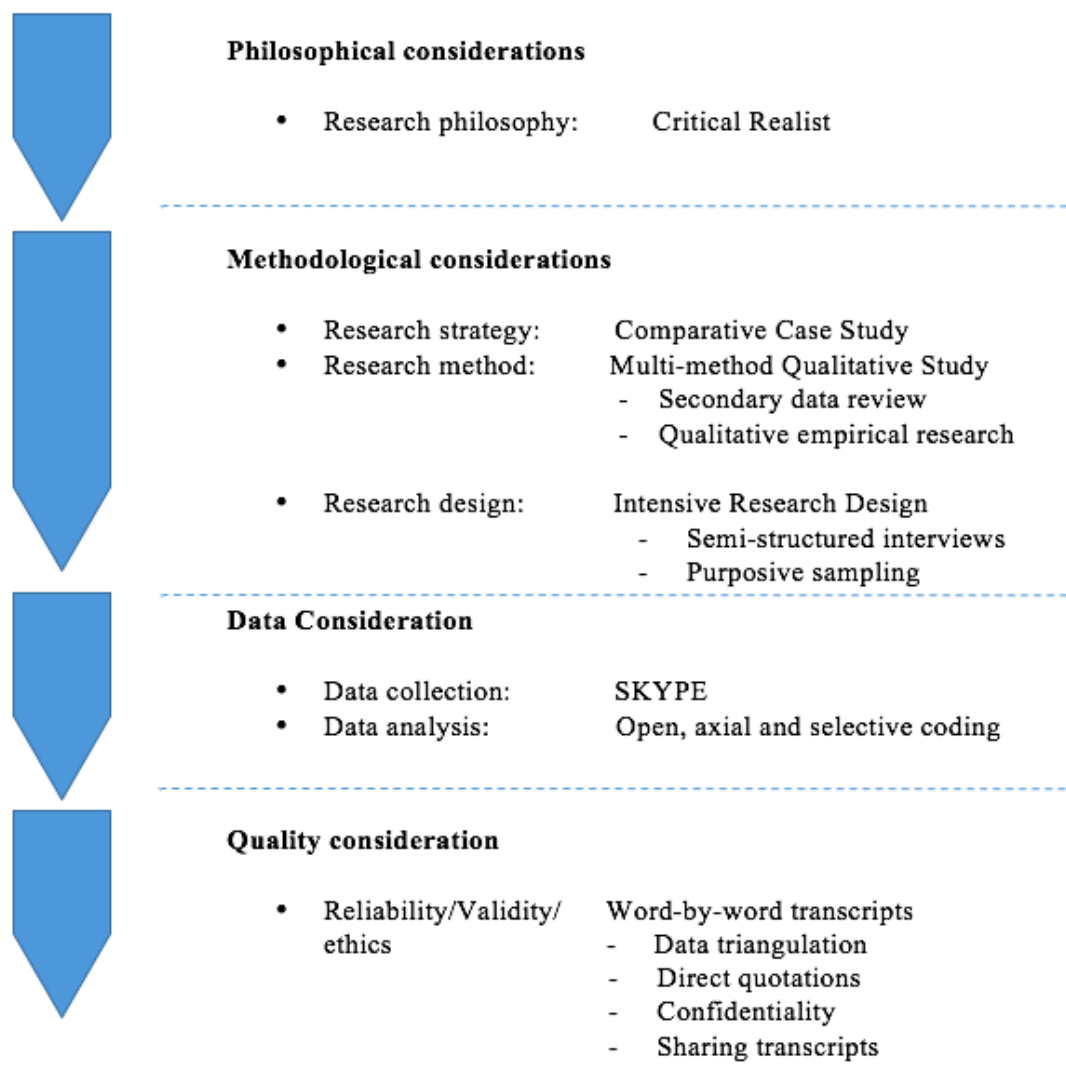
This thesis consists of 6 chapters. The first chapter has already presented the background, motivation of the study as well as the research question guiding this thesis. Chapter 2 discusses and accounts for the philosophy, and the methodological considerations. Chapter 3 will provide with an overview of the subjects and theories covered in the literature conceptualizing women's empowerment initiatives. For this we draw on the literatures on GPN and CSR, as well as the literature surrounding women's empowerment. By the end of this chapter we will summarize the main themes that guide our empirical analysis. Chapter 4 will outline the context in which such projects are sought implement: The Bangladesh garment industry. Chapter 5 will analyse and discuss the key finding obtained *via-a-vis* the theoretical considerations mentioned above. Finally, chapter 6 will conclude on the basis of the proposed research question and outline some of policy implications of the findings in relation to WE CSR projects in developing countries, and research implications for academia for future research.

Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2 - PHILOSOPHY AND METHODS

This chapter discusses and accounts for the methodological approach of this thesis. First we present the philosophy of science (section 2.1). Then we elaborate on methodological (section 2.2), data (section 2.4, 2.5), and quality (section 2.6) considerations. Figure 1 gives an overview of the structure of this chapter.

Figure 1 : Methodology overview



2.1 Philosophy of Science

In this section, we unveil the paradigm and philosophy underpinning the knowledge produced in this master thesis. We explain the foundations of our knowledge by determining our relation to reality (i.e. ontology) and how we to get to that knowledge (i.e. epistemology) (Okasha, 2002, p. 12; Rosenberg, 2005).

Anchored in critical realism, we were governed by a strong ontology and concerned with the nature of reality. Critical realists hold that is possible for social science to produce knowledge that is close to the real world and to make claims about it, while still acknowledging its constant evolution and its contingency (Archer & Norrie, 2013; Collier, 1994). Thus, in this thesis we believe that there is a reality that exists independently of human perceptions. However, our scientific writings will hardly be an accurate one-to-one description of that reality, as such our understanding of ‘reality’ is mediated by our own subjective perceptions of that reality. This implies that the process of scientific discovery in this thesis has been to seek descriptions and explanations of the ‘reality’ that are as accurate as possible without making the mistake that we are actually able to use scientific language to convey the reality as it is.

Hence, in the context of our thesis, we assumed that women’s empowerment projects in the garment industry of Bangladesh actually did exist as an independent phenomenon apart from our human perception of these projects. However, our understanding of these projects will always be mediated by human perceptions. Our task was therefore to try to approach an understanding of the actual nature of these projects by mapping out the types of concepts upon which these projects are contingent. Our goal was to conceptualize how ‘women’s empowerment’ is understood within these projects. Through our aim of coming as close to reality as possible, we unravelled the various concepts surrounding the phenomenon and attempted to develop knowledge about how women’s empowerment CSR initiatives were conceptualized in the Bangladesh garment industry, paying particular attention to the context in which they were embedded.

2.2 Research design

In the process of human inquiry about social settings, critical realism distinguishes between extensive research methods and intensive research design. While intensive methods focus on the study of a particular individual process, usually with reference to qualitative methods, extensive methods seek to find a pattern across a wide array of individuals, usually with reference to quantitative methods (Sayer, 1992). In this thesis, we are not studying a large number of women's empowerment projects but rather a smaller number of women's empowerment projects in-depth. We are thus studying the qualitative features of these projects by looking at how they conceptualize women's empowerment CSR projects within the Bangladesh garment production network. It is argued that this approach (intensive research design) is particularly powerful in giving explanations of a particular situation through non-numerical data (Yoshikawa et al., 2008).

The strength of intensive research methods derives from its ability to embrace the complexity of the studied object and to place it in a context (Cheek et al., 2004). Having not been able to do an on-the-ground assessment of the CSR projects through participatory observation or engaging with women workers themselves, we undertook a comparative case study of the selected projects by comparing the similarities and differences of their conceptualization of women's empowerment. Hence, it was crucial to build upon secondary sources, i.e. what has been written about the projects online, in project documents etc. to seek contextualization and specific explanations for each case (see table 3). Furthermore, we complemented this with interviews with various relevant stakeholders from each case, including project personnel, implementing partners, and experts in the field of development aid and women empowerment. This will be further explained in the section on data collection.

2.3 Case studies design

As Yin (2014) points out, case studies are “empirical enquiries investigating contemporary phenomenon in depth and with real world context when boundaries between phenomenon and contexts may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). Generally speaking, case studies are suitable when (1) posing questions of ‘how and why’, and (2) examining contemporary events that (3) the researcher does not have control over (Yin, 2014, p. 9-10). All three criteria applied to the project at hand.

We were engaged in a comparative case study design with a goal to tease out the similarities and differences in the conceptualization of women's empowerment CSR projects in the Bangladesh garment industry. We believed that this would help us in establishing the conditions under which WE CSR interventions in the Bangladesh garment industry exist. Through purposive sampling, we selected cases that were especially knowledgeable and with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Purposive sampling is particularly helpful "when working with very small samples such as in case study research and when you wish to select cases that are particularly informative" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 237). Thus, we thoughtfully selected four cases based on a common set of criteria to follow for a more in-depth study focus, and at the same time we were dependent on our research question (Patton, 2002). The cases were selected based on their capacity to "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2001, p. 236).

The first criterion was that all of the cases were located in the garment sector of Bangladesh, an industry that has thrived on economic liberalisation, creating a global market for consumer goods on one hand, and making possible international assembly lines and cheap sourcing on the other hand. Secondly, these cases were based on a broad-based coalition between different actors, born after the Rana Plaza tragedy as response to the ongoing challenges faced by workers in the garment sector of Bangladesh. Finally, these cases ultimate target was women workers (given the sector is highly feminized) and the concept of empowerment was highly recurrent in their discourse and goals.

We provide a brief overview of each case and summarize their differences, similarities and patterns in Table 2 below.

2.3.1 Case 1: The Women oriented case

Launched in 2013, Case 1 catalyses partnerships between international buyers, suppliers, and local NGOs (so called 'implementing partners') to empower women working in the Bangladesh garment production network through workplace programs promoting health, financial inclusion and gender equality. The project utilizes methodology of capacity building, and provides practical information and training on specific issues. The program was established in Bangladesh in 2013, beginning from the health component, and recently the team has piloted financial inclusion and the respect component where violence against women is tackled. In terms of time-scope, the project is typically implemented over a 12 to 18-month

period and is mainly funded by participating companies and from Case 1's donor partners (usually foundations of international fashion brands). The training is built on a train-the-trainer methodology to reach the greatest number of workers possible.

2.3.2 Case 2: The Consultancy Case

Launched in 2014, Case 2 defines itself as an ethical trade consultancy, delivering solutions and services across multiple countries and industries to unlock positive potential of supply chains to maximize benefits to businesses and workers respectively. By working closely with funders, brands, retailers and suppliers, the local teams 'bridge the gap' between various stakeholders to develop solutions, and thus improve labour conditions and raise productivity in global supply chains in a way that benefits brands, sites and workers equally. Case 2 has thus far introduced two flagship programs in Bangladesh; one related to women's empowerment and the other related to the management team. The former project was launched a year after the collapse of Rana Plaza and is a community-based training programme designed to empower female leaders in the Bangladesh RMG sector, and to help them learn valuable life skills in finance, leadership and health. Through these workshops (which are divided into 6 modules), taking place on a voluntary basis in so called 'cafes' outside factories, the women are said to be able to manage their family finances better, negotiate with their supervisors and ultimately develop a healthier lifestyle. Like Case 1, the module is based on a train-the-trainer methodology to reach the greatest number of workers possible.

2.3.3 Case 3: The dialogue oriented case

As a response to the tragic collapse of Rana Plaza, a partnership between Scandinavian organizations developed a model of social dialogue to establish structures and processes for workers and employers to negotiate about rights collectively and peacefully in 2014. This initiative works through supply chains and believes in a joint action between brands, suppliers, trade unions, employers' associations, NGOs and governments to be of imperative importance. The aim is to ensure that suppliers in particular act in accordance with the Bangladesh Labour Law. The training sessions delivered vary between a couple of hours, to 4 days off/on-site. Phase I of the project came to an end last year in February, and it is therefore still early to record "quantitative evidence of the programme's contribution to the

overall productivity” (Case 3a, 2017, p. 6). The rollout of Phase II has however begun this year.

2.3.4 Case 4: The labour oriented case

Launched in 2014, Case 4 is built on a collaboration between the United Nation’s (UN) International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and with support from National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity, Case 3, together with governments, trade unions, workers, factories, manufacturers, brands and retailers, deliver a series of learning and assessment services, such as training and awareness raising. Case 3 is also the only programs, which collaborates with government agencies to improve labour laws. Moreover they collaborate with brands to ensure that progress is persistent and sustained. Currently, the programme is active in 1,450 factories employing more than 1.9 million workers in seven countries. Through a ‘woman productivity toolkit’ Case 4 offers technical training, as well as soft skills coaching to the factories’ best machine operators interested in occupying supervisory positions and by increasing women’s knowledge on health issues to empower them.

Having outlined the respective cases, we now attempt to flesh out some of the differences and similarities between them. One of the important distinctions between the cases is the nature and focus area of the programs themselves. Case 1 and 2 have an explicit focus on building the capacity of women workers through training. Even though women do constitute a major part of the Bangladesh garment industry, Case 3 and 4 on the other hand only aim to build the capacity of workers in general. The topics of the trainings are somewhat similar for Case 1 and 2, ranging from health and finance to gender based violence and leadership more broadly. Case 3 and 4, are, by contrast, more focused on building social dialogue and ease the communication between workers and employers. This also means that the latter two programs include the management team and supervisors to a larger extent than Case 1 does (Case 2 does not focus on this at all).

There is also a clear distinction between the programmes delivered here. Evidently, Case 1 and 2 have moved away from policing approach, that is, compliance issues such as equal wages, and policies related to sexual harassment, to one of training, capacity building, and increased partnership between buyers and suppliers. On the other hand, while Case 3 and 4 also have a focus on these components, they are also interested in improving the factories’

compliance with core labour standards and national labour laws. To do so, they collaborate closely with government agencies to improve labour laws, and with brands to ensure that progress is persistent and sustained. The number of stakeholders involved in these initiatives is also diverse, but given that they build on supply chain management logic, also implies that the number of stakeholders automatically increases. Case 1 and 2 for instance, mainly collaborate with buyers, suppliers and local NGOs. Case 3, on the other hand, collaborates exclusively with workers and employers. In all of these programs women workers do not seem to be regarded as stakeholders as such, but are often framed as the potential beneficiaries. The narratives found in these programs are often given as following, ‘We work closely with x, y, and z to empower (women) workers labouring in the Bangladesh garment sector’.

Another relatedly common characteristic of these initiatives is that they all, in some way or another, work closely with local NGOs. There appears to be a shared understanding that such NGOs are well equipped to make changes since they understand the local context. While Case 1 and 2 have hired local NGOs to implement its project, Case 3 has hired a local NGO to assess its program. Interestingly, there appears to be a common preference for choosing the same NGOs. In fact, it appears that there are currently only two preferred implementing partners to choose among in the Bangladesh garment industry, we call them A and B. Case 1 for instance was previously working with case A, but is now working with B. Case 2 is instead working with A, and Case 3 has hired A to evaluate its program.

In regards to the financial aspect of these initiatives, it is the buyer (and their Foundation) who pays for the programs to be implemented in their supplier factories. The money is handed out to the third party (in this case the initiatives) who then pays the local NGO an amount to implement the project. Case 1 has for instance as the only initiative announced the cost of implementing its project. According to them, it costs around USD\$5,000 to implement the project in a Bangladesh factory.

As far as the support to trade unions is concerned, there appears to be diverging views on their importance. Case 1 and 2 do not work or collaborate with any form of trade union bodies, neither inside nor outside factory limits. For Case 2 this is not surprising as they are offering training to women workers outside working hours, and thus away and detached from factory floors and the management team. Case 3 and 4 by contrast do not only work closely with trade union bodies, but they also encourage the formation of so-called participation committees that may potentially represent the workers’ voices.

As far as empowerment is concerned, all of the four initiatives use indicators to measure their progress on empowerment. If the turnover rate of a given factory for instances decreased by 15%, it would imply that the workers had been empowered. If women were saving 20% more than they did in the initial stage of the program, then it would imply that they had been empowered economically. By contrast, if savings remained the same and absenteeism and turnover rates decreased by 15% it would imply that the (women) workers had been disempowered.

We synthesize the outlined differences and similarities in Table 1 below.

Table 2: Differences and similarities between the cases

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Sector	Garment	Garment	Garment	Garment
Funding	Brands and grants from donors	Brands and grants from donors	Brands	Brands and grants from donors
Year of launch	2013	2014	2014	2013
Mission	To unlock the full potential of women working in global supply chains through workplace programs promoting health, financial inclusion, and gender equality	Empowering female garment workers in Bangladesh with valuable life, negotiation and advocacy skills	Creating social dialogue between workers and employers that enables them to negotiate collectively on issues concerning their rights and responsibilities and to resolve conflicts peacefully and effectively	Collaborating with workers, employers and government to improve working conditions and boost the competitiveness of the garment industry
Training focus areas	Health, financial inclusion and gender-based violence	Health, finance and leadership	Social dialogue between employers and employees	Health, safety and worker-management collaboration
Main Beneficiary	Women workers	Women workers	Workers, participation committees and employers	Workers, employers and government, ILO, IFC
Stakeholders	Women workers, buyers, local NGO	Women workers, buyers, local NGO	Workers, employers	Workers, employers, government
Training targeted at	Women workers and employers	Women workers	Workers and employers	Workers and employers
Project Scope	Inside factories	Outside factories	Inside factories	Inside factories
Collaboration with trade unions	No	No	Yes	Yes
Collaboration with participation committees	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Compliance issues tackled	No	No	Partially	Partially
Indicators used for measuring empowerment	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings

Source: Compiled by the authors based on secondary sources of the cases (see table 3)

2.4 Data collection

A multi method qualitative approach to data collection has been applied to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon studied and to improve the quality of the collected data (see

section on data quality, 2.6) (Stake, 2010, p. 138). This means that two types of data were collected to strengthen our findings: Primary and secondary.

Secondary data such as official country reports, email exchanges and evaluations of the four CSR projects studied were gathered in form of official reports, documents and correspondence, including emails (Saunders et al., 2009). This served to verify elements derived from the interviews when deducing the conceptualization of women's empowerment, and when digging deeper in the context of Bangladesh and the potential challenges within the cases to answer our research question.

Primary data consisted of interviews with key stakeholders from each case to get an understanding of how women's empowerment was embedded in these initiatives. It also consisted of interviews with experts and other professionals from the industry, gender development and academia 'outside' the four cases who were working with the issue differently (rather than through the practice of CSR). Interviews were used to obtain unique information on the particular context of each Case and the expert interviews were deemed useful to investigate a phenomenon that the researchers were unable to observe themselves (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Stake, 2010). All together, these interviews provided us with an embedded and context contingent conceptualization of women's empowerment in CSR projects related to the garment industry of Bangladesh.

2.4.1 Collection of primary data

To answer our research question, 17 desk based semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted between 5 June 2017 to 5 July 2017, with a broad range of stakeholders as we gained access to representatives with relevance to the research questions for each Case and external to all Cases (Creswell, 2007). We justify and define such choice of methods and sampling below.

Even though our cases were selected on the basis of purposive sampling (as explained in our case study design, section 2.3), the relevant interviewees were also selected with the help of snowballing techniques. For example, we built our way through informants of Case 1 and 2 by asking some representatives of the case for further contacts. With the help of Case 1, we were for instance able to interview their implementing partner. We proceeded similarly for the gender experts as we solicited the support of an acquainted professor in getting hold of other feminist scholars which is essential for portraying the diversity in conceptualizing women's

empowerment. The below contains an overview of each interviewee and the reasons of their inclusion in our study (table 2).

Table 2: Types of interviewees and reasons for inclusion in the study

Stakeholder groups	Function	Number	Mission (general)	Objective of the interview
The four studied cases	Managers/Representative of the four initiatives	6	Design and manage CSR Women Empowerment Programs	To explore the conceptualization of women empowerment contained in CSR
	Non-Governmental Organizations	2 (national)	Implement two of the studied CSR initiative, and conduct assessment reports	To explore some of the on-the-ground realities in Bangladesh, and the role that NGOs play in empowering women
Outside the Cases	Gender experts	3	To embrace the freedom of academic inquiry and expression to create and disseminate knowledge	To explore the diversity in conceptualizing women's empowerment
	International NGO manager working on women's condition in the garment industry	1	To critically reflect on the ongoing development regarding CSR in the Bangladeshi garment industry	To explore how women's empowerment projects have been conceptualized outside the four cases studied
	Trade unions	1 (local)	To achieve the rights of garment workers	To understand the role and current conditions of trade unions in Bangladesh
		1 (International)	Capacity building of trade unions, independent from factory-floors	To understand the role and current conditions of trade unions in Bangladesh, and the conceptualization of women's empowerment embedded in projects not constrained by buyers
	Independent standard-setting body	1	A standard-setting body in the field of social compliance. Aims at creating a path to supply chain integrity	To understand current compliance challenges in Bangladesh factories and the role buyer's play
	Danish Institute for Human Rights (project manager of implementing the UN goals in Bangladesh garment industry)	1	To work with international human rights institutions to enable them to strengthen human rights	To understand how international standards are implemented in the Bangladesh garment industry

As researchers absorbed by critical realism, we aimed at explaining the complex social processes of WE CSR projects and the context in which they were situated (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). As such, we favoured the use of in-depth interviews particularly appropriate as the goal was to understand, describe and discover (Saunders et al., 2009) how women's empowerment CSR initiatives were conceptualized.

To maintain a clear focus on the overall objective and to direct the conversation toward the topics and issues, we held semi structured in-depth interviews and developed broad interview guides in advance (see annex 1). As asserted by Easterby-Smith et al. (2002), the construction of these documents help to increase the likeliness of successful data gathering and act as a topic guide without tying up the discussion entirely. For all of our interviews, we were guided by three main themes connected to our research questions: CSR, women's empowerment and the global production network in the Bangladesh garment industry. We also ensured to ask open questions (Stake, 2010) that allowed the interviewee to "vocalize their own priorities as part of their own way of describing the world as they [and their organization] perceive it" (Yin, 2011, p. 136). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews therefore enabled us to gain additional information about the conceptualization of women's empowerment on the cases and the key-informant's own perspectives that would not have been acquired otherwise (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviews usually began with a brief introduction of the research objective of this thesis, and the reasons for why their perspective was important for this particular research. After giving a brief description on what the interview would entail and how we intended to use the data, the semi-structured interview began. The interviews were recorded digitally and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes each.

During the interviews we also allowed ourselves to use grand tour questions if the discussion was moving away from our main themes (Spradley, 1979). We also made sure to wrap the interview with some 'idealization' questions (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973) such as 'how do you see the future of women workers?', and 'if you were not bound by stakeholders or funds, what would the ideal program be for women's empowerment?' and asked them whether they had anything they wanted to add towards the end.

2.4.2 Collection of secondary data

As mentioned earlier, the use of secondary data was crucial in conceptualizing women's empowerment in CSR initiatives. For this we first conducted a careful reading of materials from the initiatives that we studied, and made detailed notes. To complement this with other materials, we also went through several reports from international NGOs and the International Labour Organization (ILO) not involved in these initiatives, government sponsored bodies, research institutions, correspondence (e-mails), reviews of the field of study (journal articles

and books) as well as an up-to-date screening of the media/news-articles. This has helped us to position our primary data within its broader context, and allowed us to “flesh out, cross-check or question the picture” that has emerged (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 14). As some of the projects did not have much material online, we also asked for this which some of them happily shared. Below, we detail the various secondary sources used for this thesis. As demonstrated in Table 3, we relied on internal reports on cases, evaluation reports from independent organizations and other documents relevant to each initiative (in particular the information found on their respective websites). All sources have been anonymised due to confidentiality.

Table 3: Overview of (Anonymized) secondary sources

Data	Internal reports	Evaluation reports	Other
Cases 1	<p>Case 1a (2014). Missed Opportunity in Healthcare Delivery in RMG factories in Bangladesh.</p> <p>Case 1b (2010). Investing in Women for a Better World. March.</p> <p>Case 1c (n.d.). The women oriented Case's Partner Toolkit.</p> <p>Case 1d (2006). Women's General & Reproductive Health in Global Supply Chains.</p> <p>Yeager, R., & Goldenberg, E. (2012). Case 1's delivers real business benefits.</p>	<p>Sida (2014). Evaluation of Case 1. Sida Decentralized Evaluation.</p> <p>USAID (2014). Evaluation of Case 1's health intervention in Bangladesh. Baseline Brief.</p>	<p>Website Case 1 (2017). The women oriented case.</p> <p>Training Curriculum Case 1 (2017).</p> <p>Theory of Change (2017). Case 1's theory of change [sent by email].</p> <p>FHI (n.d.). Financial inclusion: A manual for RMG factories.</p>
Case 2	Case 2a (2013). Good Work? Benefits for Business and Workers Programme 2011-2013.		Website Case 2 (2017). The consultancy case.
Case 3	<p>Case 3a (2017). Joint Dialogue Programme: Evaluation. March</p> <p>Case 3b (2014). Concept Trial.</p>		Website Case 3 (2017). The dialogue oriented case.
Case 4	Case 4a (n.d.). Fire and building safety.		<p>Newsletter Case 4a (2016, November 16). Workers embrace factory floor democracy.</p> <p>Newsletter Case 4b (2017a, February 5). Barefoot workers feel socially empowered.</p> <p>Newsletter Case 4c (2017b, July 30). 2017 Newsletter: Our Programme at Glance.</p> <p>Website Case 4 (2017). The labour oriented case.</p>
Local NGO 1			Website Local NGO 1 (2017).
Local NGO 2	Local NGO 2 (2016). Workers' Voice. 1 December 2016		Website Local NGO 2 (2017).
Brand	Email from brand (2014, June 26, 2017).		
Gender expert	Email from gender expert KG		

	(2017, July 15).		
Examples of secondary sources outside the cases	GSCP (n.d.) Global Social Compliance Programme: Capacity Building Global Workshops. GSCP USAID (2007). Effects of a workplace health program on absenteeism, turnover, and worker attitudes in a Bangladesh garment factory. USAID, ESD, April. Human Rights Watch (2015). “Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most”: Workers’ Rights in Bangladesh’s Garment Factories. Human Rights Watch, US, April 2015 Oxfam (2004). Trading Away our Rights: Women Working in Global Supply Chain. Oxfam		

2.5 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis modes are extremely diverse and complex (Holloway & Todres, 2003). As part of the data analysis process, we proceeded to developing analytical categories with the help of open and axial coding (Straus & Corbin, 1998), through repeated readings of literature on women’s empowerment CSR initiatives in global production networks. During the stage of open coding, we read and coded all parts of the interview transcripts with a view to identifying similarities and differences in interviewees’ conceptualization of women empowerment in CSR within the Bangladesh garment production network. For this process we used a coding software (NVIVO) to seek efficiency and invest extra time to investigate trends and explore the data (Wong, 2008). This process was highly interactive and filled with internal reflections and heated debates. We then moved to the process of axial coding by seeking to determine relationships among the open codes in order to identify high level categories that may explain how women’s empowerment is conceived of in our cases. Accordingly, we identified four categories: the governance of global production networks, power and participation in CSR, labour agency, and women empowerment. Finally, we used selective coding with a review to refine our emerging theory of how WE CSR projects conceptualized women’s empowerment. Besides that, we relied on a highly abductive approach as we constantly moved between theory and empirics until there was a clear fit between the two. This was with the aim of producing strong informed and supported knowledge.

Table 4: Snapshot of coding

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Buyer pressure on suppliers - Buyer's interests clear - Allocate funds - Advocate for joint actions - Compliance issues still a problem - Buyer happy with health program to empower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unaltered power relations - Cooperative CSR 	Power of the brand
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women not regarded as stakeholders - NGOs represent women worker voice - Workers not happy with implementation - Curriculum for training developed between cases and brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of Southern oriented voices - Top-down implementation of CSR - Pre-developed curriculum 	Lack of women worker voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unions are weak/political/ - No support to unions - Support of participation committees, but women not elected - Unions not part of buyers codes of conduct - Workers beaten when organizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual labour agency - Individual worker agency - Barriers to unionize 	Lack of support to trade unions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measuring empowerment - Women as resources - Potential in women - 'unleashing' - Businesses can increase profit - Women have better health - No follow up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fixing/Saving of women - The business case - Empowerment quantified - Guaranteed outcome - Empowerment imposed 	Women's Empowerment

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data

Having discussed the themes covered during the interviews, data recording and data analysis in this thesis, the next section looks at the data quality obtained in this thesis.

2.6 Data quality

The way in which we sought to maintain the quality and the credibility of the data was by being transparent about the methods used, their strengths and limitations, and by triangulating the sources used for the study (primary and secondary) to strengthen the reliability of findings (Hammersley, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1996; Saunders et al., 2009; Silverman, 2001). One limitation of our study is that observations are not easily repeated, as the object of study is people's perceptions and ideas, which by definition are subjective (i.e. external validity) (Saunders et al., 2009). However, as mentioned earlier, and in line with our philosophy of science, we sought a description and explanation of the 'reality' that could be as accurate as

possible without making the mistake that we are actually able to use scientific language to convey the reality as it is.

Moreover, our emphasis on one context makes it difficult to generalize outside of the Bangladeshi context, and even outside the context of the studied cases as it is limited with the understanding of the subject of what gender means, and how WE CSR projects conceptualize different roles of international fashion brands, labour agency, and women's empowerment more formally. However, we attempted to counter this by ways of triangulation and by making crosschecks in relation to the data obtained. As part of our quality control efforts we have for instance shared the draft manuscript with our supervisor and other master-level students and then incorporated their comments. We also sent a draft to study informants, which helped us ensure the factual accuracy of the manuscript and refine our interpretation of events as they occurred in the conceptualization of WE CSR projects. Moreover, we have also shared our initial transcripts and findings to the participants, and asked them for their comments and/or feedback. This enabled us to compare our own interpretations with the perception of the people involved and critically reflect whether or not they were compatible (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

To attain a certain level of ethics in our research (Daymon & Holloway, 2002), we also followed the 'no harm rule', i.e. we emphasized that the discussion could be informal and confidential to allow for a maximum of freedom and safety in producing the data. Before beginning the interviews, we asked about (i) confidentiality issues, and (ii) permission to record the interview. All interviews were then fully transcribed, and sent back to the interviewees for corrections and/or feedback. Following this stage, we chose to anonymize the interviews (see table 5 beneath) as well as the secondary data used for this thesis (for the sake of not displaying the organization's names). Table 5 spells out the position of each interviewee and his/her code name used throughout this thesis.

Table 5: Code names of anonymized interviewees

	Interviewee Position	Code name given
Case 1	International manager	Case 1A
	Representative Bangladesh	Case 1B
	Founder, Chair Person	Local NGO 1
Case 2	Country manager	Case 2A
	Project Officer	Case 2B
	General Secretary and Executive Director	Local NGO 2
Case 3	Bangladesh Country Manager	Case 3A
Case 4	Deputy Programme Manager	Case 4A
Brand	Sustainability /Programme Manager	Brand

	Denmark	
Gender experts		LM KG ST

In the next section, we provide with an overview of the subjects and theories covered in the literature conceptualizing women's empowerment initiatives.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Women's empowerment CSR projects in GPNs cannot be conceptualized independently from the setting in which they are embedded. Rather, there are governing forces that may affect how such programs use and apply the concept of women's empowerment. To be able to answer our research question, we deem it essential to apply a framework that takes into account these governing forces and can explain how women's empowerment CSR projects are conceptualized in GPNs located in developing countries.

However, to the best of our knowledge, such a model does not exist. Consequently, we suggest looking at women's empowerment as being governed by the three forces detailed below (as illustrated in figure 2). These forces have been identified with the help of the literature existent on GPNs and CSR: (a) Governance of Global Production Network, (b) Power and Participation in CSR and (c) Labour Agency. Hence, the first part of our theoretical framework will look at the governance of GPNs as women's empowerment CSR projects are being led by private sector brands that are themselves operating in highly footloose industries (a). The second section will scrutinize the literature around power and participation in CSR to seek the extent to which the intended beneficiaries can participate on equal grounds in such projects (b). Following this, the third section will unfold the space that exists for labour to have influence via collective actions in the context of individual countries in the global South (c). As a final step, the 4th part of our framework will review the literature on women's empowerment. At the end of this section, we will be able to build a comprehensive framework that will help us conceptualize women's empowerment in CSR

within GPN.

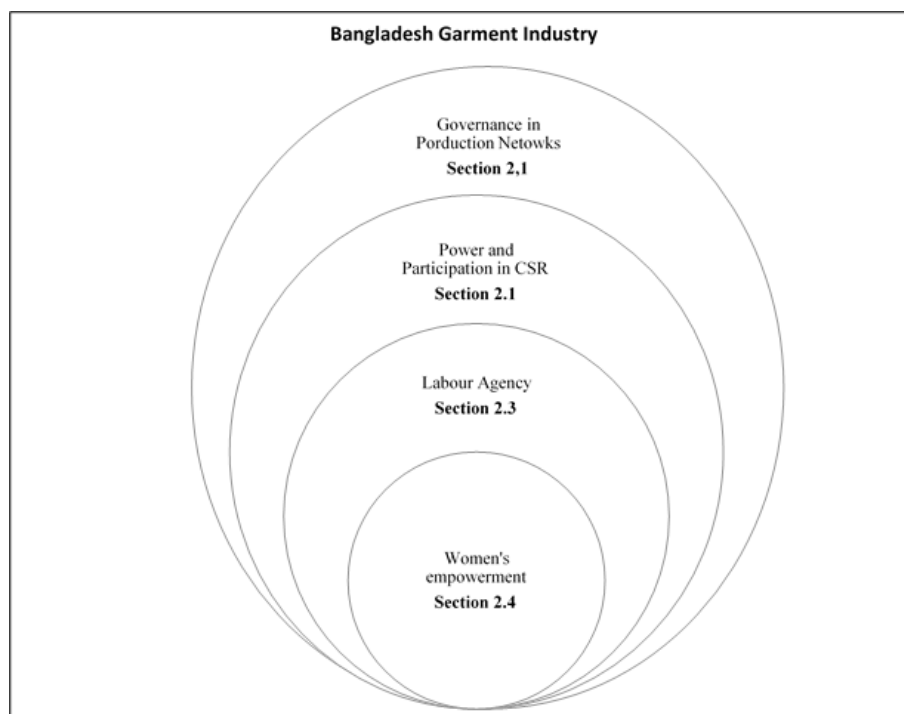


Figure 2:
Theoretical
overview

3.1 Governance in Global Production Networks

In this section, we are looking at GPN governance as brands sourcing from various parts of the world often use cut throat pricing strategies, have short delivery timings, high quality requirements, and will often move production to different production locations in the Global South depending upon which production locations/factories better serve their interest (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994). Given the reality of the new global contours of globalization, where buyers increasingly possess the power to dictate and govern the network, we argue that it is important that women's empowerment projects are understood *within* this context. In other words, if women empowerment projects are being conceptualized by private sector brands that are themselves operating in highly footloose industries and governing the network, then it becomes highly relevant to unfold buyers CSR strategies in GPNs and their governance strategies in empowering women workers at the base of GPNs more specifically.

Recent estimates by the United Nations (UNCTAD, 2013) reveals that around 80% of international trade is now coordinated through GPNs. This obviously calls for corresponding conceptual models to explain the consequences and opportunities of these contours. From a theoretical perspective, two parallel and interrelated literatures have become helpful in explaining the shifting contours of the global economy and the embedded governance structures, namely global value chain (GVC) analysis, which focuses on value creation, differentiation, and capture in processes of production and distribution (Gereffi et al., 2005), and GPN analysis, which takes account of the institutional and social context of interconnected operations (Henderson et al., 2002). In this thesis however we refrain from delving into a detailed discussion of the global value chain literature. This is because we are interested in highlighting not only how international lead firms based in the developed world drive and organize supplier networks in developing countries, but also in shedding light on the kinds of network structures and various actors, local institutional context, and the embeddedness of economic activity in broader social relations, and what role they play in structuring GPNs (Coe et al., 2008; Henderson et al., 2002). Therefore, in the next section we give a more detailed account of the modes of governance in GPNs.

According to Coe et al. (2004) global production networks represent “the globally organized nexus of interconnected functions and operations by firms and non-firm institutions through which goods and services are produced and distributed” (p. 471). A key feature of the GPN model is MNCs' progressive outsourcing of low-value, productive functions to low-cost

developing countries, while maintaining control of value creation in their home countries (Barrientos et al., 2011; Craviotti et al., 2008; Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001). Despite spatially diverse production systems, the fragmented ownership of different productive functions and the governance of GPNs being relatively convoluted, and despite that corporation are separated not only geographically, but also economically, legally, culturally, and politically, lead firms⁵ have been found to dictate the terms and conditions of participation in networks and chains through different types of *governance* modes that have given birth to ‘manufacturers without factories’ (Gereffi, 1999) who act upon participants with ‘no logo’ (Klein, 2000) ‘at-a-distance’ (Neilson et al., 2014, p. 2).

A huge amount of literature now exists on how lead firms in export-oriented sectors in the global South exercise such control (Locke & Romis, 2007). More specifically, buyers have been found to undertake a paternalistic and monopolistic role in relation to their sourcing factories in developing countries (Coe & Hess, 2008). Not only are they adopting flexible and short-term production methods that involve large number of suppliers (Levy, 2008), making sub-contraction of orders down to the most vulnerable actors possible (Hobbes, 2015), but they are also demanding lower prices, faster delivery times and good quality products (Acona, 2004; Oxfam, 2004). In other words, they are exercising their corporate power to organize ‘who produce what when – and where’ (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994; Gibbon & Ponte, 2005). ‘Just-in-time’ pressures from buyers increase the demand for flexibility from workers, such as overtime and the use of casual workers, whose numbers can purposively be increased or decreased from day to day depending on the flow of orders (Barrientos, 2008; Raworth & Kidder, 2009; Wills & Hale, 2005). Women for instance, juggling between their productive and reproductive roles, with few alternative sources of income, are in a weak bargaining position to resist such pressures (Barrientos, 2013). In her study of the African fruit and Indian garments, Barrientos (2013) for instance found that women workers were the weakest link in a commercial process, acting as a buffer at the bottom of the purchasing practices. These evidence shows that both suppliers and workers are ‘powerless’ with few or limited options for influencing the governance of the chain by the lead firms. The concept of governance therefore becomes useful in this thesis as it helps explain coordination along a network, and recognizes that trade in goods and services are more than arm’s-length, market-

⁵ By its very definition, a lead firm is “a firm that has the power to coordinate and control operations in more than one country, even if it does not own them” (Dicken, 2007, p. 16)

based transactions, where lead firms organize activities to achieve functional division of labour along the value chain (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994).

As a relation network, GPN theory also suggest that the governance of a network not only involves the buyer and the supplier (vertical aspects of a network), but also other actors such as nation states, international organizations, civil society, trade unions, NGOs, workers and communities (i.e. ‘bottom up’) as well as new spheres of authority and novel institutional arrangement (Eden, 2009; Gereffi, 2001; Humphrey & Schmitz, 2001; Ponte & Gibbon, 2005). Neilson & Pritchard (2009) calls this the ‘horizontal aspects’ of a network which plays a key role in structuring GPNs from the ‘bottom-up’ (Coe et al., 2008; Henderson et al., 2002). This is because, in practice, lead firms cannot govern their network alone as it is ‘spread’ out to different actors, that separately and/or together collaborate, compete and communicate across the continuum (Bair, 2008; Barrientos, 2012; Barrientos et al., 2003; Pelger & Knorringa, 2007; Rainnie et al., 2011).

Thus, the governance of a network remains central for understanding how power is exerted and distributed in GPNs. As women’s empowerment projects are being conceptualization by private sector brands that are themselves influencing the terms and conditions of their purchasing practice, where power is mostly in their hands, then it is highly questionable how these brands undertake such CSR strategies. In this thesis, CSR is defined as a set of practices and policies enacted by corporations with the aim of limiting negative impacts of businesses, *and* contributing to society through activities that benefit people and planet (Gond & Moon, 2011, p. 2). Therefore, to understand the WE CSR strategies undertaken by brands, we must first understand what types of CSR in GPN brands typically engage in. According to Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen (2014) there are two paradigms that may explain how private actors have been implementing CSR in their GPNs, the compliance paradigm and the cooperative paradigm.

The former emerged as a response to the rise of GVCs in which goods and services were produced in unacceptable manners (e.g. the use of child labour). Buyers were criticized for their commercial practices, such as the demand for low prices and seasonal products on one hand, and their continuous insistence on compliance with their corporate codes of conduct on the other hand (Acona, 2004; Barrientos, 2003; Oxfam, 2004). This rise of private standards therefore facilitated new forms of coordination (and governance) by buyers across a global scale (Dolan & Humphrey, 2004; Henson & Humphrey, 2010). To meet ever decreasing

prices, suppliers could no longer pay their workers the minimum wage. Furthermore, to address seasonal demands, they could not provide them with stable employment, let alone contracts, and as a consequence, suppliers were compelled to make workers work overtime to meet just-in-time orders (Oxfam, 2004; Ruwanpura & Wrigley, 2011; Tokatli et al., 2008). Under such circumstances, suppliers producing for international markets have limited bargaining power and limited options for influencing the governance of the network. However, this paradigm has been criticized to ignore the social embeddedness of participants. At the same time evidence showed that this paradigm brought only limited improvement in working conditions in developing countries (AFL-CIO, 2014; Lund-Thomsen et al., 2012),.

Because of the limitations of the compliance-based paradigm, a broad-based coalition of actors began to push for the adoption of a new paradigm of CSR in GPN (note the shift from GVC to GPN), namely the cooperative paradigm. In this thesis, we regard women's empowerment CSR initiatives in GPNs as belonging to the cooperative paradigm as such initiatives are (in theory) based on a broad-based coalition of actors to collectively find 'development oriented' approaches to work with CSR in GPNs in which all stakeholders are believed to have equal voice (DIEH, 2013). In this paradigm the social embeddedness of the network becomes important. Such initiatives are not only executed as multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSI) such as the UK Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), but also NGOs (e.g. Oxfam-UK), and private-sector consultant have pioneered a new cooperation-based approach to CSR in GPNs. According to this view, four issues are pertinent, (i) the need for buyers to change their purchasing practices to circumvent that suppliers do not comply with sustainability standards; (ii) the encouragement of buyers to invest in programmes which target capacity building for both local suppliers and their workforce; (iii) cooperation with local actors such as NGOs and/or trade unions; and (iv) engagement in strong partnerships to solve labour rights violations in first-tier factories and other challenges at the base of GPNs (Cheyns & Riisgaard, 2014; Locke & Romis 2007; Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen 2014).

However, in her study of the South African fruit and Indian garment industry, Barrientos (2013) noted that brands resisted the adoption of responsible practices. Along similar lines, Lund-Thomsen and Coe (2013) described how Nike undermined to link better supplier incentives, factory management training, and awareness raising activities among the workers employed at a Pakistani supplier. In such instances, even though this paradigm, or this way of doing CSR in GPN, may work in practice, researchers such as Barrientos (2013) and Lund-

Thomsen and Coe (2013) have argued that international brands have failed to revise and integrate better purchasing practices, let alone altered power relationships in GPNs (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). Another critique of this model is that the voices of developing country suppliers, workers, and communities have largely remained silent (for critique on the lack of Southern oriented voice see also Blowfield & Frynas 2005; Prieto-Carron et al., 2006). Lund-Thomsen and Coe (2013) however asserts that there is an alternative way of doing this. According to them, the traditional code implementation auditing could usefully be deployed to provide top-down pressure on manufacturers to improve the conditions in export-oriented factories, at the same time workers would be given training on their rights, thus applying a simultaneous bottom-up pressure to receive safe working conditions.

However, women's empowerment projects that are implemented under these conditions may experience some tensions between inclusion and cooperation one hand, and more competition and interests linked to actors' positions in GPNs on the other hand. This has implications for how women's empowerment is ruled out at the base of CSR in GPNs, as brands cannot necessarily do both to serve the case of those located at the bottom.

In summarizing this section, we have showed that brands possess substantial power. Hence, if the power of the brand remains the base against which CSR is ruled, it has implications for how such initiatives can really include their intended beneficiaries. This leads us to the next section.

3.2 Power and Participation in CSR

Having outlined the ways in which CSR in GPN is ruled by international buyers, our interest is now to seek theoretical knowledge on how this role is used in relation to other actors of these initiatives while undertaking women's empowerment CSR project. The interest is on whether this leading role of brands gives space to other actors (here workers) and 'push' for the voice of the receiving beneficiaries in the design, execution, and implementation of women's empowerment CSR projects.

A crucial challenge and focus in the development driven debate has been on how to democratize CSR decision-making. A major concern among researchers has been that CSR largely rest on a very top-down, nested, Northern and 'expert' driven character. Thus, the core thrust in this debate has been to find answers to how the CSR agenda is negotiated and who

gets to participate in the design and implementation procedure (UNRISD, 2003, p. 21), and more specifically, at the expense of whom? In particular, questions like ‘who has the power to make decisions?’, ‘what power structures are implicit in CSR’, and ‘who has a voice in the debate and the formation of CSR programs’ needs to be thoroughly considered (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2006). In the case of this thesis, women would ideally be regarded as important stakeholders, and they would have the chance to become agents of decision-making. Women would also be asked about their needs and worries that they would like to tackle and/or learn from Western buyers, international bodies or local implementing partners. Beneath we will attempt to highlight what the literature outlines about power and participation in CSR.

The lack of discussion on power issues and the dominating discourse of the business case⁶ for CSR are very salient in relation to stakeholder management. According to the father of the stakeholder approach (Freeman, 1984), stakeholder management is defined as a neutral process that brings business representatives, NGOs and public sector agencies together to address both large and small challenges facing MNCs in developing countries (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005). This approach has also increasingly been adopted in the cooperative paradigm of CSR in GPN as described in section 2.1. Stakeholders are thus defined as “any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Such stakeholders are crucial as they represent not only the beneficiaries of CSR, but also the implementers of CSR (Burchell & Cook, 2006). Yet, even though the development driven approach of CSR believes that all stakeholders should be included, some stakeholders are often excluded. These so-called ‘fringe’⁷ stakeholders or the marginalized ‘others’ (Lauwo, 2016, p. 1; Giuliani, 2016; Marshall, 2011; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016) are precisely those in developing countries who do not normally have a voice in society: small-scale farmers, ethnic minorities, home-based casual workers and women workers who often work under dangerous conditions exacerbated by the presence of MNCs (Barrientos, 2013).

For instance, initiatives like micro financing schemes for women at the bottom of the pyramid (BoP) would imply that a move towards greater gender equality has been initiated (thus

⁶ For discussion on the business case see section 3.4.1

⁷ Hart and Sharma (2004) define fringe stakeholders as those with less voice, power, and urgency. This could be related to women in certain contexts (McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016). Generally, fringe stakeholders belongs to the people living in the BoP. They could be weak, non-literate (Hart & Sharma, 2004; Jamali & Sidani, 2011), or enslaved (Crane, 2013) and even indigenous peoples (Banerjee, 2011).

reaching SDG 5). Yet, evidence for the voice and agency of women workers within these CSR efforts has been debated extensively (Dolan et al., 2012; Karnani, 2007; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016). Unilever's Project Shakti for instance suggests that men often take over women's micro-businesses (Thekkudan & Thandon, 2009)(see also Goetz & Sen Gupta (1996) for similar findings), and Thornhill (2016) critiques Coca-Cola's 5by20 BoP programme for neglecting to consult with women stakeholders about their own needs. Therefore, a power dimension needs to be incorporated into CSR and stakeholder thinking, so that power relations are altered rather than maintained. From a GPN perspective this would imply that buyers purchasing practices and governance strategies would allow for power relations to be altered. This can ensure that the missing stakeholders can benefit at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, which will foster a better understanding between corporations and the marginalized (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005).

As the discussion above propounds, such unequal power dynamics among stakeholders may have negative consequences on the beneficiaries. It is therefore important to investigate whether the receivers of such CSR initiatives have a genuine space to exercise their influence. In light of including 'fringe' stakeholders for instance, some developing countries have opened up the possibilities for a dialogue on MSI. MSI are defined as "private governance mechanisms involving corporations, civil society organizations, and sometimes other actors, such as governments, academia or unions, to cope with social and environmental challenges across industries and on a global scale" (Mena & Palazzo, 2012, p. 527-28). This would also imply a shift from the compliance paradigm to that of a more cooperative paradigm (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). Yet, as noted by Dolan and O'Pondo (2005), even if these groups occasionally have a voice in MSIs, ensuring that the representation is genuine and, once at the negotiating table, that the stakeholders involved have *real* bargaining power is more important than the actual physical 'presence'. This is because even if these individuals do raise their voice, power relations between different stakeholders still shape the issues that are on the agenda, the alliances that are formed between actors and the subsequent successes that are identified (Dolan & O'Pondo, 2005). As such the negotiation and bargaining power of various 'fringe' stakeholders quickly become very weak (Hart & Sharma, 2004).

This situation therefore raises some fundamental questions about the extent to which the stakeholder theory actually delivers its 'intended' aims, especially since it challenges the assumptions that partnerships are neutral and infinitely inclusive for all stakeholders involved

(Newell, 2005; Utting & Marques, 2010). This approach is thus not only undermined by the lack of participation and inclusion of those for whom development is regarded, but also by the fact that it is often the companies themselves that select the stakeholders involved (UNRISD, 2003).

Therefore, which stakeholders are included and how they are engaged in CSR research and practice is of paramount importance (de Bakker & Den Hond, 2008; Mayes et al., 2012; Parent & Deephhouse, 2007). Critical CSR scholarship has also encouraged researchers to adopt a more ‘bottom up approach’ to (i) understand how CSR is received and enacted by stakeholders in ways which potentially aid, or exacerbate societal problems (Banerjee, 2011; Idemudia, 2011), and to (ii) dig deeper into the role of power, ethnicity, class and gender to achieve a greater representation of these missing voices (see Blowfield & Dolan, 2008; Grosser & Moon, 2005; Hart & Sharma, 2004; Khan & Lund-Thomsen, 2011; Marshall, 2011; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016; Prugl, 2015; Pyke & Lund-Thomsen, 2016), and not only those with the most legitimacy, urgency and power (Mitchell et al., 1997). In relation to the former, top-down CSR initiatives have also been criticized for aiming to ‘solve’ developmental issues through managerial logic without understanding the underlying complexity of such societal developmental challenges (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Newell & Frynas, 2007). Khan and Lund-Thomsen (2011) for instance take this argument, positing, from a postcolonial perspective, the underlying economic and cultural imperialism behind the ethical guidelines of MNCs that is suppressed on to suppliers in developing countries. By following this logic, the priorities and interests of those in developing countries are not heard nor met (Prieto-Carrón et al., 2006).

What is important to note from this, and the preceding discussions, is that those with power, legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997) are usually the actors who are financially better equipped (e.g. those who provide and receive funding); while those who do not have power, and those who are rarely included in the formation of CSR-related projects, are also usually the actors who lack financial stability. NGOs that receive a huge sum of money to undertake projects, acting as local implementing partners, play a critical role in facilitating workers’ voice. Yet, the critical literature on this also explains that some NGOs may be co-opted into the worldviews of corporate managers, losing their independence when they are reliant upon financial contributions for MNCs to undertake their work (Morris-Suzuki, 2000). Some NGOs may engage in business-like activities such as service delivery function - for which the danger

of co-optation may haunt - while others may act as advocacy or watchdog organizations who mobilize for policy changes (Bauer & Schmitz, 2012). The former role is in particular dangerous for marginalized people, including women, as NGOs may begin to think and act more commercially (Murphy & Bendell, 1999) at the expense of workers' interest. Filtering fringe stakeholders' experience through others can, at the end of the day, also be misleading, and dilute any changes of fostering meaningful dialogue (Auret & Barrientos, 2004; Utting, 2007). In fact, feminist scholars have also criticized the extent to which NGOs (even with female leaders) can actually speak on behalf of women workers (Thornhill, 2016).

For the case of this thesis, power and participation in CSR seems to exclude women workers as potential stakeholders. This has implications for women's empowerment projects, as these projects are by definition developed *for* women. We therefore raise concerns around WE CSR projects that do not account for women as stakeholders in such programs, and yet frame them as the intended beneficiaries.

3.3 Labour Agency

The use of voice and power in the design of CSR strategies could also be seen in relation to the broader horizontal context in which women's empowerment projects themselves are implemented. That is, labour is not a passive victim whose voice and participation is only affected by the conceptualization of international brands and their CSR strategies in GPNs, rather it is increasingly also affected by the context in which they are embedded and their own actions as active participants in the economy. Building on these ideas, this section will investigate the broader role of trade unions to exercise their influence through collective actions within the context of individual countries in the global South. Labour agency is important in this section as it allows workers to resist structural impediments and 'unfair' conditions at work.

However, finding answers to these questions may, as we will show, also vary according to the theoretical perspective we apply. While labour agency has been deemed crucial for workers engaged in CSR initiatives, both from a GPN perspective as well as from a feminist perspective, there are substantial differences between what 'labour agency' entails as a concept in both schools of thought. The reasons for investigating labour agency from a feminist perspective, is largely because the GPN literature still needs to pay more detailed attention to the role gender plays (cf. Barrientos, 2014a, b). Before outlining how labour

agency has been understood in GPN writings, and in feminist writings, we first highlight the broader role of trade unions in the areas in which women's empowerment projects are implemented..

3.3.1 The importance of trade unions in developing countries

Trade unions have traditionally been the medium through which workers can represent their voice. If workers feel they can voice their concerns to employers to bargain and negotiate their, and other workers, terms of participation, such actions will lead to some aspects of empowerment (Booth, 1995; Freeman, 1980). Therefore, trade unions in particular play a key role as the *collective* voice of workers, where voice reinforces the “positive economic, political and social effects [of unionization] in pluralist democracies” (Bhattacharjee, 1999, p. 308), and forms the basis of dignified work and employment (Rodgers, 2001; Standing, 1999). However, union's rent-seeking role depends largely on three factors, (i) the number of members in unions, (ii) whether the concerns raised are able to capture most of the workers interests, and (iii) the extent to which employers accept the formation of unions in export-oriented factories in developing countries (Boeri et al., 2001, p. 50).

Since the inception of globalization, trade unions in developing countries have also faced major challenges. In particular, the shift from full-time regular employment to atypical forms has made the labour force scattered and fragmented, rendering collective actors difficult day by day (Mishra, 2001), and limiting the effectiveness of unions as a platform through which workers can jointly organize themselves. Moreover, since trade union membership has declined in a number of developing countries, it both calls into question the representativeness of trade unions and hinders meaningful social dialogue around the world (ILO, 2000). Furthermore, it has been claimed that erosion of public support for unions has accompanied the decline in union power to bargain and organize (Milton, 1986, p. 331). In the next section we pay attention to labour agency from two streams of literature: GPN and feminist scholarship.

Paying more detailed attention to conceptualizing the role that labour plays in GPNs has only recently become an emerging field of interest (e.g. Barrientos, 2013; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Cumbers et al., 2008; Delaney et al., 2015; Lund-Thomsen, 2013; Neilson & Pritchard, 2009; Phillips & Sakamoto, 2011). In fact, Gereffi (1995) and others' (Bonacich & Appelbaum, 2004; Kaplinsky, 2000) typology of the GVC framework has been heavily

criticized for leaving little room for what Henderson et al. (2002) call, “different forms of capitalism” (p. 441), which are replete with different social norms and institutional arrangements. As outlined in section 2.1, this stream of literature has been criticized for not capturing the full complexity of power relations that exists and persist in wider systems of production, let alone the focus on labour or the broader social context in which firms operate (Bair, 2008; Barrientos et al., 2003; Pelger & Knorringa, 2007). As Coe and Hess (2006) acknowledge: “workers are barely mentioned in literatures that appear more concerned with firm strategies and upgrading potential” (p. 16), but rather “appear as passive victims as capital seeks cheap labour” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 47).

However, this is now an emerging area of interest. The literature on labour agency in GPNs has usually conceived of labour agency as workers acting collectively through trade unions with the aim of defending their rights and improving their conditions at work (Coe & Hess, 2013; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2008; Riisgaard, 2009; Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). The need for such actions came at a time when MNCs had such supremacy that employees began to question what they could ultimately do by themselves. Trade unions therefore came to act as a medium for fostering communication between employer and employees, for which unions protected the individual employee (Boeri et al., 2001). However, in reality, scholars critical of lip service CSR initiatives in GPN have criticised that unions cannot and have not been encouraged enough by MNC’s own voluntary codes of conduct, let alone by developing country governments. Empirical evidence for instance shows that voluntary codes have minimum, if any, impact upon process standards such as freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining power for labour (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Bartley & Egels-Zanden, 2015; Lund-Thomsen & Coe, 2015).

Cumbers et al. (2010) argue that Katz’s (2004) distinction between the 3R’s - *resilience*, *reworking* and *resistance* strategies offer a useful framework to analyse labour agency in GPNs. *Resilience* is defined as the small acts of ‘getting by’ that help individuals or groups cope with everyday challenges *without* challenging the status quo. *Reworking*, in turn, reflects people’s efforts to materially improve their conditions by reforming existing system in ways that redistribute resources and ensure better conditions at work. Finally, *resistance* refers to the ‘game-changing’ resistance where workers challenge the ‘fixed’ system by regaining control of labour time and its use in the spheres of production and social reproduction. From the perspective of the existing GPN literature, creating space for the potential of worker

actions to actively rework, and in some cases resist, prevailing governance regimes within production systems is an important step (Cumbers et al., 2008; Rainnie et al., 2011).

However, in assessing Katz's categorization, Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) and Lund-Thomsen (2013) both assert that most workers in export-oriented factories in developing countries rarely, if ever, engage in resistance strategies that actually shift the status quo in their favour. While the focus in GPN writings have indeed been on workers' collective actions, studies have nevertheless shown that labour agency in export-oriented factories in developing countries is mostly exercised through workers' efforts of 'getting by' or coping with their every-day challenges for instance by securing greater returns from their participation in GPNs (Carswell & De Neve, 2010; Lund-Thomsen, 2013), and by economic upgrading. In their study of the Tiruppur garment cluster in India, Carswell and De Neve (2013) for instance highlighted that workers adopted everyday coping strategies to cope with the challenges associated with working in export-oriented factories. Such actions are not a notion of agency understood purely in terms of positionality within garment GPNs, but rather one that is also embedded in local social relations, livelihood strategies and the reproductive sphere. Gender is for instance shown to be of paramount importance in shaping workers' agency. In another study, Lund-Thomsen (2013) similarly argued that in the Pakistan football industry, labour agency was indeed shaped by the *intersection* of the horizontal and vertical dimensions. He found that agency was shaped both by the governance structures of GPNs and the local socio-economic contexts of work and employment as manifested in the gendered nature of work, the spatial location of workers, livelihood strategies and patterns of labour recruitment. Drawing on what we discussed earlier in section 2.1, we could frame it differently: Worker's agency should not only be seen in terms of the 'vertical' dimensions of GPN structures stretching across and between countries, but also in terms of the 'horizontal' dimension of embeddedness in local geographical areas, institutional settings and communities (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009).

From this point of view, we hypothesize that even though GPNs writings do, in practice, place an emphasis on workers collective agency, and thus workers ability and possibility to challenge the system, the reality is that labour agency is mostly exercised by individual, unorganized workers through their own small decision-making processes. It is however crucial that workers can change the status quo, both peacefully *and* by outright resistance (whatever leads to the result), "even if only temporarily, rather than coping strategies

designed to ameliorate its impacts” (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010, p. 216). Relatedly, we argue for the importance of investigating labour agency at the intersection of vertical *and* horizontal dimensions, as this may unveil for instance why trade unions in developing countries may be unfavourable to women workers, and why there are - given the social construction of gender - structural difficulties for women to form unions. This could for instance also be linked to local conditions where trade unions are sexist, or to international influence where the structure and bargaining power of trade unions could be hindered by the governance of CSR initiatives and thus the brand. As we for obvious reasons are interested in *women’s agency* and not workers’ agency *per se*, and since the GPN literature still needs to pay more detailed attention to the role gender plays (cf. Barrientos, 2014a, b), in the next section we briefly explore what women’s agency means from a feminist perspective.

The feminist literature holds a substantial difference with that of agency in the GPN literature. Importantly, it attempts to bring agency to *women* (i.e. women’s agency), and not merely labour agency as such. For feminist scholars, ensuring a balanced representation of women in trade unions’ decision-making bodies is an important indicator for women’s involvement (e.g. see Agrawal, 2001). But feminist scholars have emphasized that WE initiatives have largely neglected the collective aspect of agency that enable women to challenge structural discrimination (Kabeer, 2003). This has been pointed as a crucial element for women to act together to their own interests and to challenge social inequalities. Stories of women coming together and challenging the system have been recorded (Jayawardena, 1986), and emphasis has been on the importance of being solidary to that particular type of agency by facilitating unionization, and often the ones that conflicts with the otherwise rather restricted system of trade and investment. In fact, the notion of empowerment itself emerged as a way to challenge the status quo and the supporting power structures embodying patriarchy. Yet micro-financing schemes for instance, which aims at empowering women economically, does nothing to change prevailing structures (Hossain et al., 2011, 2012), but rather reinforces that empowerment is an individual process. Capacity building programs may therefore also more likely adhere to resilience and reworking (Katz, 2004), rather than emphasizing the collective and resistance strategies.

For these reasons, feminist understandings of the empowerment of women in the global South emphasize that this involves public actions to transform the laws, policies, and practices which constrain personal and group agency. This, from a GPN perspective, points at the

horizontal dimension. For the case of our thesis, this structure would involve some of the systemic issues mentioned in the GPN literature relating to the distance between workers and brands, the price pressure and the barriers to unionization.

To summarize the preceding discussions, we have showed that while the core trust of GPN and feminist writings may have different analytical foci, both theories deem it crucial for workers to be able to exercise their collective agency. The feminist literature alone would however not be able to answer the question of *what structures of inequalities* women should try to ‘get out of’. By applying the GPN framework we can however answer our research question better, as we are reminded that it is the brands power and governance strategies from which women should try to bargain ‘out of’. Moreover, this section has also showed that workers usually exercise individual struggles to ‘get by’, in particular by coping with their everyday challenges. These findings have important implications for how CSR initiatives in developing countries aim at empowering women workers. Crucially, if women are ‘empowered’ individually, and by redistributing existing resources in different ways (Katz, 2004), then it leaves little room for choices they can take to change the structural inequalities and power relations.

3.4 Conceptualization of Women’s Empowerment

As we have highlighted the global forces under which women’s empowerment CSR initiatives take place, we now come to the next section of our theoretical framework and explore the concept of ‘women’s empowerment’, thus coming at the core of the onion described in the beginning of this chapter.

Building on the local context and dynamics in which CSR women’s empowerment projects are evolving, we suggest to make use of feminist theories and highlight two contextual conceptualizations of women’s empowerment: A conceptualization of women’s empowerment as a CSR project at the basis of the GPN conceptualized on the basis of the business case, and a conceptualization of women’s empowerment as a democratized CSR project giving power to labour agency. In the next chapter, we contrast and discuss these two conceptualizations.

3.4.1 Women empowerment as a CSR project: altering power or perpetuating it?

As mentioned in section 2.1, in global production networks, the involvement of brands in empowering women through CSR has been based on the ‘cooperation paradigm’ and translated in two ways: In the multiplication of cross sector partnerships, namely MSI, and the emergence of UN-enterprise partnerships, commonly known as Transnational Business Initiatives (TBI) (Calkin, 2016). These initiatives aim at reinforcing the role of businesses in shaping gender policies and tackling gender issues (Prügl & True, 2014). TBIs build on the hybrid strategy of merging corporations, international development institutions and NGOs in order to address gender issues. The most notable corporate-led women’s empowerment effort is Nike’s *The Girl Effect* campaign, a partnership between the World Bank and Nike foundation to raise awareness about the ‘unique potential’ of young women in low-income countries (Prügl, 2015). The lack of resources spent on adolescent girls was also identified as an “irrational investment gap” (Bexell, 2012, p. 395). Global private sector Leader’s forum, a partnership between 21 MNCs and the World Bank, which aims at ‘expanding economic opportunities of women’ worldwide is yet another example (Calkin, 2016; GPSLF, n.d). Smaller scale CSR cross sector partnerships are usually concerned with either training women workers in the South as recalled by Unilever’s project, Shakti (Dolan et al., 2012), Levi Strauss engagement with HERproject in Egypt (Ditlefsen et al., 2016), micro financing schemes (Eversole, 2004), or even trade of cosmetics to customers in the bottom of the pyramid (e.g. see Dolan & Scott, 2009).

When women empowerment is conceptualized in a buyer driven chain and as a corporate led strategy, it may be tempted to take roots and legitimacy in an adjacent rhetoric: The business case (McCarthy, 2017). Under the aphorism ‘gender equality is smart economics’, and by referring to women as the new ‘public’ face of international development (Bexell, 2016; Calkin, 2015a, 2016; Chant & Sweetman, 2012), the business case stands under the assumption that expanding opportunities for women and girls helps to reduce poverty and yields benefits to businesses. This logic is built on the idea that women and girls are the so-called ‘untapped’ but yet unique ‘resources’, who, if empowered by international brands and organizations through training, will be lifted as the custodians of the families, rise as consumers and workers, all to benefit households, villages and communities (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010; McCarthy, 2017). Consequently, the key proposition adopted in these circles is that empowerment is about self reliance allowing women to contribute to fiscal and national

health, spur economic growth, foster development, and increase profit and financial stability which represent tremendous missed opportunities for businesses (Prügl & True, 2014).

In a working paper, the World Bank (2006) stresses the win-win rhetoric of empowering women and addresses companies as such,

“Women’s lack of economic empowerment, on the other hand, not only imperils growth and poverty reduction, but also has a host of other negative impacts, including less favorable education and health outcomes for children and a more rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. In sum, the business case for expanding women’s economic opportunities is becoming increasingly evident; this is nothing more than smart economics” (World Bank, 2006, p. 2).

Despite this rampant business case, scholars from the feminist and critical CSR streams have shown high scepticism towards the win-win logic (e.g. Bexell, 2012; Prügl, 2015). Those who have criticized CSR in GPN on the basis of participation have argued that before speaking about the logic of the win-win of women empowerment and ‘smart economics’, it is important to assess the validity of the win for businesses (the business case) and especially the validity of the win for women (the development case). McCarthy (2017) for instance reviewed the scholarship evidence on the business case. She draws that while evidence have been laid out for the win for businesses (e.g. see Coleman, 2010; Duflo, 2012), the focus of any feminist scholarship (which is the birthplace of women empowerment itself) would be, by definition, on the win for women. Yet, while drafting this review, it has been noticed that the focus of the win-win rhetoric has been more focused on building a strong business case and less on investigating what is in there for women in the business case.

Examples of academic papers outlining the correlation between women's productivity and empowerment are numerous (e.g. Coleman, 2010; Pellegrino et al., 2011; Quisumbing et al., 2004), but very few cases have actually attempted to transcribe the win for women from the women beneficiaries perspective, especially the win for women in the bottom of the pyramid (Bexell, 2012; Grosser & Moon, 2017)(cf. Kabeer, 2003; Thornhill, 2016) or the voices of the ‘fringe stakeholders’ mentioned in section 2.2 (Lauwo, 2016; Marshall, 2011; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016). Unsurprisingly, women are ‘the missing link’ from the win-win rhetoric, even when these initiatives are about filling the gender void (Bexell, 2012). But if women are

the ultimate target of women's empowerment initiatives, then why is there more emphasis on documenting the win of the agent (i.e. corporations)?

When placing women at the heart of the debate, the empirical and impact assessment of the win for women remains mixed. For instance, Scott and Dolan's (2009) work has suggested a positive correlation between direct sales of Avon beauty products and women's empowerment in South Africa, whereas Thornhill's (2016) field assessment in the same country of another program, the Coca Cola 5by50 campaign, has shown the absence of the win for women workers. The disparity in results derives not only from the different ways WE CSR projects are implemented, but also from the diverging feminist streams these scholars belong to, and their subsequent different approaches to gender politics (see classification in Grosser & Moon, 2017). But in all cases it remains evident that the feminist scholarship has approached the business case with caution. Various corporate led empowerment projects have been judged as failing to challenge the restrictive social norms that prevent women and girls from becoming independent (Hickel, 2014). Micro financing schemes (e.g. BRAC in Bangladesh) for instance have been implemented to benefit the ultra-poor women. Yet, such programs usually work against the normative institutions in the society (Mair & Marti, 2009), are often taken on the request of their husbands, and fail to deliver their intended purposes (Rahman, 1999). Interestingly, as Dickens (1998) points out, impact studies 'preaching' for the business case have usually been conducted in the Global North and the few ones, which have been conducted in the South, did not generate the same optimism as in the North. As such, Dickens (1998) highlights that the business case has been more successful in breaking the glass ceiling than with the 'sticky floor'⁸.

Another major criticism addressed to the business case is that it tends to apply a reductionist approach to empowerment. As such, it assumes an easy transition from a corporate initiative built on training to a achieve community win and business win (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). For women this does not go without consequences: Promises of 'lifting' families and communities out of poverty also harness a highly essentialist narrative, representing women as hard working, peaceful, caring, altruistic and inherently virtuous (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010). They also put an inhumane burden on women who 'must' act as an actor of change and impact the whole community (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

⁸ A term coined by Catherine Barheide to contrast with the glass ceiling. It points at discrimination keeping women at the bottom of the job scale (Morgan, 2015)

As we have outlined the rise of the business case adjacent to women's empowerment and its critics, it appears that the fear of feminists scholars is that the business case might oversimplify empowerment and focus more on the 'win of the businesses' than that of women. This has particularly triggered frustration in the feminist sphere from which empowerment originated: Those who built empowerment on the collective transformation of the political, economic and social structure, and power relations through resistance (Bisnath & Elson, 1999). Corwall and Anyidoho (2010) put it in their critical statement. "For many feminists, 'women's empowerment' represent a sorry - but not unfamiliar - tale of how a once-radical concept was stolen by the high priests of neo-liberalism only to be foisted onto women in the global south as their putative salvation [...]" (p. 145).

With relation to our research question, we contend that if power and participation in CSR remains unequal, and if CSR is ruled at the basis of the GPN, the interest of international brands might be the ones 'favoured'. Hence, such governance dynamics may impact the conceptualization of empowerment by representing the interests of businesses solely. Yet, one might wonder if in an 'alternative' space, in a context of increased participation, and increased labour agency, it might be possible to conceptualize women's empowerment that accounts for the win of women workers in line with the dreams of challenging the existing gender structures and roles (Oakley, 1972; McCarthy, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987)? As such, we question whether there would be space to move from a World Bank business case conceptualizations of empowerment as,

"the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes" (emphasis added)(World Bank, 2017, p. viii).

To that of the interceptors of the concept as set out in the feminist literature,

"the process by which people, organizations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of

others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community”
*(emphasis added)(Rowlands, 1996, p. 103).*⁹

Against these two definitions, we outline and contrast three different dimensions of empowerment,

1. Gender as a binary variable versus power relations
2. Empowerment as an individual vs collective process?
3. Empowerment as a top-down vs bottom-up approach?

3.4.2 Gender as a binary variable or power relations

Contrasting the World Bank versus Rowlands definition means to first highlight how each understands ‘woman’. Indeed, there are different accounts of what constitutes gender, and building on these accounts, there are various roots of inequality. In other words, there are various framings of the ‘problem’ and diverse suggested solutions. While “feminist theory is a critique of the status quo and therefore *always political*... the degree of critique and the nature of the politics vary” (Calas & Smircich, 2006, p. 286, emphasis in the original). As such, the conceptualization of gender differs when empowerment is used as a corporate strategy or when it is part of an emancipatory feminist journey.

The World Bank business case driven definition of women’s empowerment embodies the view of sex as a binary variable in which gender becomes the appropriate behaviour (i.e. gender roles) of sexed human beings (McCarthy, 2015; Oakley, 1962). This is in line with a liberal understanding of gender in which inequality is defined as *between* ‘the sexes’, and consequently associated with a person’s sex (‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’) (Alsop et al., 2002). Under this binary view, issues of gender and organizations are typically framed as having to do with the lack of economic opportunities in comparison to men. The conceptualization of sex/gender within organizations was consequently seen as gender neutral, implying that organizations functioned on neutral formal processes (Jaggar, 1983), and institutions were established to maintain the rational social order (Calas & Smircich, 2006). It has been noted that most of the CSR and management literature hold this binary vision and has sometimes even confused sex with gender (Born & White, 2003). Therefore,

⁹ Notice the shift from individual to people and organizations

women's empowerment in a business case driven conceptualization comes as 'women' versus 'men' issue (see Boodna, 2011). Within this view, positivists' research correlates women's performance and gender equality by referring to visibility measures as a way to advocate for the business case (e.g. Bear et al., 2010; Fernandez-Feijoo et al., 2014).

Under this binary view of gender, economic liberalism and the breakdown of the relationship between the state and the business are seen at the root of inequality towards women. Consequently, women's empowerment would mainly focus on enhancing (women's) individual freedom, and choice was seen as a remedy to gender imbalances (Benschop & Verloo, 2016). This translates in advancing equal opportunities for women and men to develop themselves and compete *equally* for rewards. Breaking down barriers for women and 'allowing' them to enter male dominated jobs is for instance seen as an 'adequate' solution to gender inequality (Calas & Smirchich, 2006; Lorber, 1997; McCarthy, 2015).

The solutions stem from an individual public sphere to *better integrate women in the economy*. Gender politics therefore lied in human resource development, and legal acquisitions for women to be like men (McCarthy, 2015). The alignment of the business case with the binary view on gender is somehow convenient: As highlighted above, the logic of the win-win aligns perfectly with the idea that an increased economic integration of women through human resource development is the pathway to empowerment as it fosters the idea of shared value: economic integration leads to income, consumption and harness growth. Furthermore, this binary view is convenient to the business case as it embodies that organizations are 'gender neutral'. Hence, they would not be accountable for perpetuating any inequality regime within their own space. It is therefore not surprising that the World Bank business case definition, focussing on having businesses as 'catalysers for change' would disregard organizations and focus on women's choice in their definition. This somehow explains why most women's empowerment CSR initiatives are focussing mainly on the economic side through micro financing schemes and training women workers on developing their resources such as health education and on financial management.

Unlike the World Bank view, Rowland's (1996) conceptualization of women's empowerment stems from a different view on gender. Rather than positioning individuals at the centre of inquiry and assuming binary notions of 'women' and 'men', or 'feminine' and 'masculine' roles, feminists like her has placed *power* and conflict at the heart gender issues (McCarthy, 2015; Townsley, 2003, p. 624). As such, instead of looking at the inequality issues in terms of

lack of opportunities to women, it was relevant to see how gender shaped the distribution of power at all levels of the society. As such, the set of roles attributed to women (e.g. caretaking, femininity traits) were partly the reasons for inequality for which organizations (including businesses) play a key role in reinforcing and strengthening these gender roles (EIGE, n.d; Koester, 2015). Later on, Butler (1992) however completely disrupted the binary definition of gender as she demonstrated that gender is also a social construction and called for gender not to be put in a box, but rather to be “a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end ... it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler, 1999, p. 43). From this perspective, the focus should be on how power functions influence the idea of ‘womanhood’. In contrast to thinking of gender as a possession or an attribute of people working in organizations (i.e. performance), she considered the ways gender(ing) is an outcome or a co-production of organizing processes (performative) (Butler, 1999). It is from this understanding of gender that women’s empowerment originated as a concept (Cornwall, 2016). When gender is seen in terms of ‘power’, it is not surprising that em’power’ment becomes a suggested feminist solution to inequality.

For that matter, inspired by a Foucauldian vision of power as “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (Foucault, 2012, p. 92), those at the origin of ‘empowerment’ and aligning with Rowland's definition, noticed that power has so far only been studied from pure masculine lenses of state domination and oppression (namely ‘power over’ in Lukes 1974). Hence, they have argued for power to be conceptualized as deriving from ‘everywhere’ and as a ‘generative’ force (Hardy & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998; Leder, 2016; Rowlands, 1998; Sharp et al., 2003). Power is everywhere means that power is relational. Power is exercised from the public to the private. It can be seen in the economy, in the relationship and at work.

Power is ‘generative’ means that it is a counter power, an art shaping ‘creation’ (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003). It could be seen as an ‘energy’ of assembling people and stimulating activities for them (Rowland, 1998). Consequently, challenging gender relations through empowerment is essentially not about replacing the power of A with that of B, and producing social inequalities, because women do not want a ‘bigger piece of the cake but a *different* cake’ (Kabeer, 2001). From this perspective, it is an exercise of power through rebellion and force over the interest of others in order to create new actions and possibilities and no

dominance (Charmes & Weringa, 2003; Rowland, 1998). It would therefore translate to a mode of generative or productive power, the ‘power to’. This dimension is defined as an open fight for an increase in resources - material, human and social - to act upon and challenge the injustice faced by the other (Mayoux, 2003). Resources and control of resources (such as education or land) are needed for an open confrontation that counters the orders of fathers, and for daughters to rebel against their father or husband's (Malhorta & Schuler, 2002).

To sum up, we stress that besides the governing forces - section 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 - that may affect the conceptualization of gender, the view on gender is also deterministic to how women's empowerment might be conceptualized. It is not surprising that the World Bank definition - when focusing on the win of the businesses would disregard the ways in which organizations might perpetuate gender roles and inequalities and not refer to it when speaking about empowerment, but rather stress the importance of increasing human development resources to women for a better economic integration. This equation to welfare provision of empowerment embodied in the business case is firmly disputed by those who conceptualize gender with regards to power relations and acknowledge power to be positive, relational and everywhere from the language to the political (Battilwala, 2007). The following distinction is essential in analysing how our cases view gender and how they conceptualize empowerment.

3.4.3 Empowerment an individual process or a collective process?

We now highlight the second main distinction between the two definitions: The focus on the individual versus the focus on the collective.

As the World Bank definition is adjacent to the business case, it is perhaps not surprising that the focus of this conceptualization has been on the *individual* woman as an entrepreneur (Wilson, 2011), that is, on economic empowerment, aiming for a guaranteed outcome of wealth accumulation (Cornwall et al., 2007; McCarthy, 2017; Kabeer, 1999; Roberts, 2015). This comes to contrast a practice of empowerment as a process involving individuals, groups *and* organizations (Rowlands, 1998). Scholars argue that the 21st narrative of empowerment through CSR initiatives was introduced as a mechanism to silence the negative outcomes of free global economy on equality itself and the concept was therefore used to shift the focus of the problem from questioning the free markets (the organizations), to liberating (the individual) people in the South through the promotion of inclusive markets (e.g. Prügl, 2014; Roberts, 2012, p. 88; Elias, 2013). Hickel (2014) supports this argument by suggesting that

empowerment was introduced to distract from the issues embedded in the organizations themselves. From this perspective, the disempowerment of women workers in for instance Bangladesh becomes the reasons for which globalisation is yet not fair, and for which companies still remedy to this by investing in the individual. Structural issues such as tax evasion, inequality regimes and global governance are disregarded from the debate altogether. Under this logic, if one were to fix the problem, it would have to focus on giving individual freedom to women for economic upgrading and access to jobs and opportunities (Rottenberg, 2014).

The focus on the individual aspect of empowerment is one main criticism posed by the feminist scholars to the business case embodiment of empowerment (McCarthy, 2017; Chant & Sweetman, 2012). Cornwall and Anidoho's (2010) put forward that, "In contrast to indigenous notions of empowerment that promised transformation through mobilization and collective action, this alien 'empowerment' is individualistic, and instrumental. It peddles in gender myths that sustain an image of the 'good woman' as the deserving object of development assistance" (p. 145). It is important to remember that the notion of women's empowerment emerged as a way to challenge the status quo and the supporting power structures embodying patriarchy. As Kabeer's early work in 2003 highlights, empowerment is concerned with challenging the *structure* of inequality both at the individual and collective level. Not only does this kind of empowerment acknowledge that women's issues are not their 'own issues', it also puts great emphasis on the systemic nature of the issues and women's collective agency to overcome such struggles (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Kabeer, 2001, 2003).

Historically and transnationally, it is also difficult to think of women's rights that were achieved without the collective organization of women drawing attention and fighting for such issues (Radke et. al., 2016). Indeed, the early feminist literature on empowerment stems from the recognition of gender related issues as systemic power relations issues and emphasizes the agency of women alone and together in fighting against oppression. It thus follows that with reference to the Foucauldian generative power of 'power', feminists stressed the importance of 'power with' (Rowlands, 1998). Moreover, the idea of being greater as a whole, than individually, with no zero sum game has been praised by feminist and grassroots activists as it calls for insuring 'justice' collectively and not a new form of inequality individually (Rowlands, 1998).

As we show how the business case mainly focus on the individual aspect of empowerment, we recall that for feminists, the collective and systemic aspect is key in achieving gender equality. Yet, we wonder how the collective can be accounted for if women's empowerment CSR conceptualization operates at the basis of the GPN without much space given to labour to undertake empowerment. Reflecting back on section 3.3 we are reminded the limited space labour has to define its own role in relation to negotiating for better conditions at work. It is for that particular reason that we view agency to be a key element in our study.

In the table beneath we show the main difference between the two views of empowerment.

Table 6: Empowerment dimension 1

	World Bank Definition	Rowlands' definition
Empowerment dimension	Individual	Individual and Collective
Ways of empowerment	Financial upgrading	Community participation

In sum, whereas empowerment has mostly been regarded as an individual process from the definition adjacent to the business case (i.e. the World Bank definition), the feminist scholarship (e.g. Rowlands) contends that empowerment is both an individual *and* a collective process, with emphasis on the latter in particular. Examples of empowerment projects adhering to the individual aspects of empowering women therefore focus on upgrading women financially, for instance through micro-financing schemes of training on health related issues. By contrast, local efforts to bargain for a betterment of conditions and mobilizing resources on a community level is one way the feminist scholarship discusses empowerment.

3.4.4 Empowerment as an inside out or an outside in process

The last distinction between empowerment as a corporate led strategy and empowerment as an emancipatory notion is that while the latter conceives it as a strategy stemming from the 'outside', the former views it as a self-directed process coming from 'within' (McCarthy, 2017).

According to McCarthy (2017), many international organizations and businesses have come to the understanding that women's empowerment translates to 'empowering women'. However, she contends that this is a fundamental linguistic slip, as it positions agents of empowerment as *outside* of the women themselves. These agents could either be businesses themselves, or even NGOs and governments, depicting women as objects onto which empowerment is 'done' on to. From this understanding, it is perhaps also not difficult to

understand why post development analysis of various CSR empowerment initiatives have pointed at the emergence of the visual representation of women as capable only waiting to be ‘saved’ and ‘fixed’ (e.g. Nike’s video on women empowerment). Such an understanding has emerged as businesses and international organizations have increasingly began to portray themselves as the one’s ‘saving’ women - the victims - from the sorrows of developing countries, at the same time as they are portraying themselves as the ones ‘unleashing’ their full potential (Bexell, 2012). That is to say that, women are portrayed as the problem that could become a solution once corporations or international organizations helps them. From this perspective, it is commonly held that by embodying the empowerment strategy of businesses, women will gain a certain degree of power to change the world for the better (White, 1992). They will export their knowledge to other women in their field (e.g. as advocated in HERproject), and translate this to their families and communities. But this can only happen from the outside.

For feminist scholars however, empowerment is a *self-directed* process, and is about fighting structures of inequalities and about changing the status quo to enhance women’s collective agency (Rowlands, 1995, p. 103). As empowerment is seen as a self-directed process, it also means that empowerment cannot be done ‘on to’ someone (Kabeer, 2001; McCarthy, 2017), as otherwise postulated in corporate-led WE CSR project. Rather, it is a process that comes from within. While saying this, we also concede that some aspects of power within empowerment can be ‘supported’ by so called ‘allies’, such as NGOs. The danger of bestowing such power is however that it can be taken away the same ‘easy’ way it was granted (Rowlands, 1998). On these grounds, it therefore becomes essential to criticize WE CSR projects that perceive empowerment as a ‘em-ment’ where empowerment is presented with the power taken out (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010). Yet, if empowerment is a process, just like any other social justice issue, it becomes highly important to acknowledge its long term time dimension and slow incremental process (Kabeer, 2003).

In concluding this section, we synthesize the previous discussions on the dichotomy between the two definitions. We have showed that when organizations adopt a binary view on gender, the emphasis is more on integrating labour into the market. Organizations then typically adopt this view by stating the obvious need to ‘invest’ in women. WE CSR projects in this international context is therefore conceptualized through a business case argument for which investment in women leads to win for businesses (i.e. a guaranteed outcome). This also

implies that empowerment itself is done ‘unto’ women. This view ignores power relations between businesses and wider society, and assumes free choice for all.

In the table below we summarize section 3.4, and provide a final summary of the chapter before proceeding to the analysis of our empirical data.

Table 7: Contrasting two empowerment views

	World Bank definition	Rowland’s definition
Gender view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Binary (men versus women) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender as power relations
Gender solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to the labour market • Economic choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting power relations, changing structural inequalities, and challenging the status quo
Organization view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations are gender neutral • Investment in women empowerment are good for businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations may perpetuate gender inequality • The interest of organisations and women are not always aligned
Empowerment dimensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment done ‘unto’ people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-directed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment seen as an outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment seen as a long process that does not necessarily leads to an outcome
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual and Collective
CSR empowerment projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resources development • Training on access and control of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community efforts at the local level • Collective efforts to improve working conditions

3.5 Summary of the chapter

We have thus far introduced a variety of theories and terms that are of use to conceptualize women's empowerment in CSR within GPN. In the first part of this chapter, we have presented the main governance dynamics in which women's empowerment are embedded. In a second part, we have outlined the 'women empowerment' dichotomy by contrasting two stands on empowerment: A bottom up, individual and collective process versus a top down individual approach. To the best of our knowledge, there is no 'ready-made' framework to analyse the conceptualization that women's empowerment CSR projects in GPNs takes in developing countries. We therefore suggest to build upon the theories presented above to compile a useful framework to interpret and analyse our findings (see figure 3).

By reviewing the governance of production networks, we highlighted how governance is typically exercised by private sector actors in global production networks. We showed that international brands have substantial power in terms of dictating their sourcing practices in developing countries. This propelled us to think of the CSR approaches typically applied by the brands (compliance vs. cooperative forms), and made us reflect on the power brands play in the design of CSR. This idea will be further investigated to answer our research question as the ***power of the brand*** will undoubtedly affect the conceptualization women's empowerment, i.e. empowerment as a bottom up process or as a top down approach.

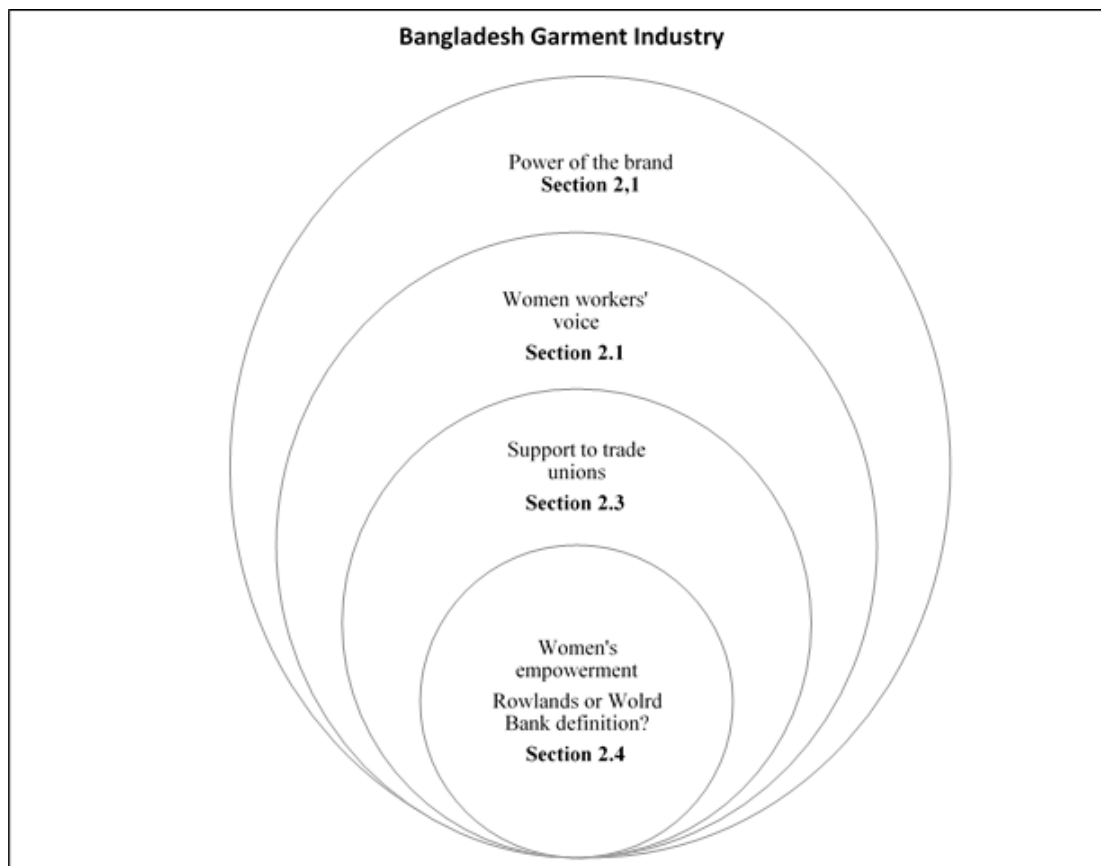
Conversely, we investigated power and participation within CSR to seize the space that exist for all stakeholders to be involved in CSR. Yet, we found that 'fringe stakeholders' are usually missing from the process of engagement. This has significant impacts on the conceptualization of women's empowerment as it has a direct influence on how women are seen and whether the process comes from within or is simply about developing resources. It might be possible to argue that if CSR is a democratized process giving equal voices and power to those 'fringe stakeholders', it might facilitate the conceptualization of women's empowerment as a bottom up approach. For that reason, we investigate the extent to which women workers themselves are present in the design of these initiatives.

Furthermore, we have highlighted that agency as a concept is highly relevant to both the GPN and the feminist empowerment literatures. As such, the space available for labour to *resist* through collective efforts was found to be narrowed in contemporary CSR in GPN studies, and yet crucial to an empowerment concerned with challenging power relations and focussing

on the collective power of the community to create changes. As such, *support to trade unions* would undoubtedly foster the collective dimension of women empowerment.

It is against these indicators and their interactions that we analyse the concept of women's empowerment in CSR in the Bangladesh garment production network.

Figure 3: Women empowerment as a top down CSR approach



Source: Compiled by authors

Chapter 4

CHAPTER 4 - UNDERSTANDING THE BANGLADESH CONTEXT

This section will unfold the actors involved in the Bangladesh garment industry, and how governance is mediated in this network as to understand how it may affect the conceptualization of women's empowerment.

4.1 The Bangladesh garment production network

Quddus and Rashid (2000) believe that it is the decision made by big international buyers in the garment industry that shape the structure of global production. Buyers in the Bangladesh garment production network are said to be heterogeneous, ranging from expensive department stores, high street retail chains, and fashion brands to outlet and discount stores. However, given the difficulties of doing business in Bangladesh (e.g. weak government system, institutional voids), it is mainly the mass market retailers and low-end fashion buyers, mainly from the US, who can afford to work here. The buyers present in Bangladesh today represent a “who's-who of the world's major volume retailers” (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004, p. 143), and includes big brands such as Wal-Mart, Gap, K-mart, Levi Strauss from the US, and leading corporations such C&A, H&M, Bestseller, Primark, Marks and Spencer from Europe (Asia Foundation, 2001, p. 16). In almost all of the fire disasters in garments factories in Bangladesh, such as Rana Plaza and Tazreen, the names of these international brands had been found as major buyers of garments produced in the Bangladesh garment industry (Hobbes, 2005). Although their influential position could be seen as a competitive advantage in improving the conditions in Bangladesh, these buyers however (mis)use this power to leverage and dictate lower prices (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004).

As explained in chapter 1, it is by no coincidence that Bangladesh has become a favourable destination for international fashion brands to source their garments. The costs of producing garments for instance constitute only a small fraction of the total costs of doing business in the country. A recent paper published by the World Economic Forum (2015), prepared in collaboration with the consultancy firm Accenture, offers a useful step-by-step breakdown of value addition in a typical shirt exported from Bangladesh to Germany. The direct labour costs of making such a shirt is only 0.6% of a €23 t-shirt retailed in German (see figure 4). Evidently, the buyers take the largest share of the pie. Even though the Bangladesh government has introduced a range of laws to control the social and environmental behaviour

of operating businesses in Bangladesh, including, Factories Act (1986), Employment of Labour Act (1965), Payment of Wages Act (1936), Environmental Protection Act (1995), Workmen Compensation Act (1923), Labour Act (2006), and its commitment to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more recently, these laws have routinely been flouted due to lack of enforcement by government agencies, as well as because the country lacks basic political will and necessary resources to implement the relevant laws effectively (Belal & Roberts, 2010). As a result of the limited capacity of the Bangladesh government to enforce its labour laws, a number of more collaborative CSR initiatives have emerged to encourage a safe working environment that is socially, environmentally and ethically compliance for the workforce, such as The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, and the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. Yet, foreign brands appear to be profiting from the weak governance and the lack of legislation in the country (Oxfam, 2004).

Moreover, the vast majority of factories in Bangladesh are 'zero-service operations' (rather than free-on-board), which means that apart from cut-make-trim (CMT) operations, they have little else to offer the buyer in terms of research and design (R&D), marketing and sales services or quality assurance (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). In terms of items produced, the bulk of the RMG industry specializes in low-value added activities and basic and casual wear products such as woven trousers, shirts, blouses, knitwear, T-shirts, sweaters and jerseys (BGMEA, 2017; Haider, 2007), making social upgrading at the bottom of the network almost impossible. From this perspective, the Bangladeshi garment industry is largely located at the lower end of the value chain (Carr, 2004; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Even though value chain participation has brought short-term gains through an increase in export earnings and local employment in Bangladesh, Bair and Gereffi (2001) and Bair and Werner (2011) both found, in an international context however, that these may be eroded in the long run if international buyers shift their sourcing of products and services to other cheaper, low-cost manufacturing regions in the developing world. Many fashion brands have for instance already moved from China to other low-cost countries such as Bangladesh or Vietnam (Bains & Avins, 2015). In addition, there are also macro related costs of doing business in a developing country like Bangladesh which are outside the control of the garment producing factories themselves. These include costs associated with institutional voids, poor infrastructure, red tape and corruption (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004).

Figure 4: Costs of a t-shirt manufactured in Bangladesh

Source: Adapted data from World Economic Forum (2015)

Given Bangladesh's distance from its buyers and customers, these various indirect costs take on even greater significance because of their implications for lead times. Factory owners in Bangladesh consequently find themselves in a bottleneck, trapped between the demands of a global industry characterized by almost no season and a domestic environment characterized by unpredictability of future orders (Yasmin, 2014). Kabeer & Mahmud (2004) note that there is in fact no guarantee in this sector that the orders will come in on a regular basis. Consequently, factory owners work in a climate of extreme uncertainty which may pose further challenges as competition gets more intense, especially since there is no such thing as seasonal collections, only productions, and suppliers are under constant pressure to uphold lead and agile 'just in time' deliveries (Yasmin, 2014). This is ever more fluctuating since for many suppliers only a few global brands will be the majority of their business, making them highly dependent on them.

Moreover, to add to these uncertainties, employers find that they are being cited ever-decreasing prices for their goods at a time when they are also under pressure to comply with the various codes of conduct that buyers are imposing in response to stakeholder pressure (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Carr et al. (2000) therefore argue that production and distribution of garments has created a so-called 'global assembly line', in which buyers from the developed world set the terms of conditions - in other words what is to be produced, by

whom, where, when, and at what price (McCormick & Schmitz, 2001). These factors help to explain the structure of the garment industry in Bangladesh and the informal character of much of its employment (Kabeer et al., 2011).

Due to the weak state regulatory system, MNCs often require their suppliers to undergo audits by private auditing bodies that they recommend, such as the Accord. As a result, buyers play a significant role in regulating the garment sector instead of the government of Bangladesh itself (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2014). However, one way that workers could fight for their agency is by joining trade union bodies. We explore this in the next section.

4.2 Trade union bodies

In this section we discuss one element which may help to pave the way for women empowerment, namely trade union bodies. In the section that follows we will investigate the setting and the current and previous nature of trade unions bodies in Bangladesh. This will allow us to outline whether national conditions are favourable to trade unions.

A brief historical account is important to understand the role that trade unions have played, and continues to play pre- and post industrialization in Bangladesh. In the early 1970s, Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan and inherited big industrial enterprises in jute, textile, steel and sugar. These enterprises were characterized by strong trade unions, and were organized by left parties (Muhammad, 2011). Workers of these enterprises had also been organized and were politically active since the early 1960s. However, with the inception of liberalization, governments, civil and military were cited as doing everything in their power to capture these trade unions (Ibid.). Muhammad (2011) notes that the government even resorted to violence, including the killing of innocent men and female workers, in the hope of gaining control. With the co-option of labour leaders into the ruling elites, corruption in association with management also became a common practice. As a consequence, mistrust between workers against their leaders had been spread, and trade unions were weakened to assert workers' agency altogether, especially since questions of wages and worker benefits were assigned to expert commissions who were made up of state representatives (Ahmed, 2004). Eventually, such corrupt practices contributed to a loss of credibility and a decline in the strength of trade unions (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004; Muhammad, 2011).

Today, the trade union movement is split along party lines and political leanings. It has been estimated that the garment industry has around 63,000 unionized workers out of the formally employed 4 million people (LO/FTF Council, 2015). Currently, there are only 222 unions in the RMG sector that are registered with the Department of Labour in Bangladesh (Ibid), with the largest and most important trade union being the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) which has 27,000 members, mostly women. But this small number is not surprising, especially given that the Bangladesh labour law requires that no less than 30% of a company's employees must agree in order to certify a union (BILS, 2009), and at the same time they must also obtain authorization from the government. In numbers, it would imply that in a factory of 30,000 workers, as many as 9,000 workers would have to sign an agreement.

On an international level, international organizations such as Human Rights Watch and ILO have also criticized the Bangladeshi government for its lack of involvement and enforcement of laws that encourage, rather than restrict, trade unions (ILO, 2013). The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has registered several legal flaws that affect negatively the trade union movement's environment. Unions can for instance only be formed at the factory/establishment level, with some exceptions, and trade unions are still not allowed within export processing zones (HRW, 2016). Thus, while freedom of association and collective bargaining principles are in place in national labour law, in practice, however these are muddled with several phases of implementation, with sometimes extremely cumbersome procedures to follow at each stage. Consequently, this inevitably poses restrictions and delays in relation to the right to organise (BILS, 2009). So while the lack of trade unions may be related to a lack of capacity issues, it however also showcases a deep-rooted historical anti-union mind-set (LO/FTF, 2014).

Even when workers do mobilize, either violently or peacefully, changes also appear to happen. In fact, as noted by ILO, wage increases in the garment industry have usually followed "mass protests and strikes that disrupt the industry" (ILO, 2013, p. 9). After the collapse of Rana Plaza for instance, the country's four million garment workers went on protests and strikes, and received a wage increase from USD\$38 to USD\$68 in November 2013, an increase of 64% (Yee, 2015). Moreover, the National Labour Law emphasized the provision of four factors related to unionization: (i) factories must allow workers to join trade unions without the prior consent of their employer, (ii) factories must allow workers to form participatory committees, (iii) factories must have to improve living standards by securing and

allocating funds, and (iv) factories must provide workers with medical and childcare facilities (Research Initiative for Social Equity Society, 2014). Nevertheless, the implementation of these laws is still weak and the government lacks the resources, the administrative capacity, and often the political will to protect workers' rights.

Phil Robertson, the deputy of HRW stated in an interview,

“Let’s remember that none of the factories operating in Rana Plaza had trade unions ... If their workers had more of a voice, they might have been able to resist managers who ordered them to work in the doomed building a day after large cracks appeared in it” (HRW, 2016). In regards to the RMG sector, ILO (2013, p. 72)

He also recently outlined that compliance of labour laws and regulations was the weakest in the RMG sector and pointed that it is also the sector where unions are virtually non-existent. Even when workers attempt to unionize, they face severe consequences. HRW (2015, 2016) has for instance documented cases of assault and threats of union leaders. In the recent Ashulia incident, where thousands of garment workers staged mass protests demanding a three-fold hike in pay, police fired rubber bullets that injured 10 demonstrators, and around 1,500 workers have been sacked by the factory owners (Safi, 2016).

Going beyond the worker-level, we now attempt to review the gender dimension of trade unions in Bangladesh by assessing women's participation in trade unions; and secondly, we identify barriers of women workers to join trade unions and possible remedy in promoting women's participation in trade unions in the Bangladesh garment industry.

It is no surprise that for feminists it is crucial to ensure a balanced representation of women in trade unions' decision-making bodies as an indicator for women's involvement. This is more so in Bangladesh, since the overall trade union representation is low in itself, but even lower for women (BILS, 2009). In a recent publication, titled 'Vulnerable Empowerment: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities of Female Garments Workers in Bangladesh' conducted at Sufia Kamal Bhawan, it was reported that 55% of women felt that their rights were violated due to the absence of trade union. Moreover, nationally speaking, the female member share of trade unions is only 15% (LO/FTF Council, 2015). While, women's poor representation in trade unions is explicitly obvious, trade union leaders commonly agree that the number of women members in trade unions has not increased in a proportional manner with women's

participation in the country (ILO, 2009, p. 9). It is also surprising that even though women are relatively active as leaders of organising workers, only a small number of women do in fact hold high-end positions in the trade union organization ladder. In a report published by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS, 2009), it was found that only two organisations out of 17 trade union federations had women as presidents. Ahmed (2004) notes that the reason why women do not, assuming that they have the opportunity in the first place, progress along the ladder, is because of the fear of sexual harassment. Many of the barriers women face therefore becomes an extensions of the problem they already face in the labour market. Such barriers, he argues, are also related to the lack of a supportive environment in the workplaces for women to contribute to the workplace governance (Ibid.).

In their research on the export-oriented garment manufacturing in Bangladesh, Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) also reached similar findings and outlined how women faced additional barriers just because they were (socially constructed to be) women. In particular, they argued that since trade unions in Bangladesh were very male dominated and therefore lacked the collective bargaining ‘culture’ that can include these women, it left limited, if any, space to discuss ‘women’s issues’ - such as harassment, proper toilet facilities, maternity leave and childcare (Ahmed, 2004; LO/FTF Council, 2015). In her research on the collective action of women in the Bangladesh garment section, Dannecker (2000) also noted a number of negative issues influencing the development of solidarity among (women) workers which reduced the collective action inside factories. More specifically, she found that most of the (women) workers did not perceive collective action as feasible as (i) salaries were negotiated *individually*, (ii) the work was atomised, (iii) rules and sometimes regulations restricted interactions between the workers and (iv) high levels of turnover. All these issues in turn rendered the possibilities of women workers to mobilize as a collective force. Consequently, women could not unionize to demand even the national minimum wage, let alone the means to negotiate for basic rights such as maternity leave. Critics also contend that factory owners in Bangladesh have intentionally created different classes of workers, which impede the workers to unionize (Ahmed, 2004). Consequently, female garment workers’ collective agency is severely ceased in the context of the Bangladesh garment industry (Kabeer, 1999, 2001).

In sum, the Bangladesh RMG sector is very weak both in regards to its laws and regulations related to protecting workers rights. Unions are virtually non-existent, and workers are

therefore not able to organize themselves to defend their own rights and interests in terms of wages, working conditions, and health and safety. Women workers in particular asking for the improvements of sexual harassment and maternity leave appears to be in a second stage, i.e. when compliance issues are properly effectuated. In order for such issues to change, it appears important, on a national level, to foster a strong political commitment to the enforcement of labour laws and regulations that are favourable *for* workers in general, and for women workers in particular, while on the international level it calls for more serious involvement of international buyers.

In highlighting this section, we have shown some of the issues persistent in the Bangladesh garment industry. In particular, we have shown the prominent role of international fashion brands, their governance strategies, and the lack of support to trade unions. These dynamics severely limit the space for labour to define its own role in relation to improving their conditions of work, and even more for women workers.

In the next section we analyse our empirical data.

Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5 - EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In this section, we apply our ideas from our theoretical framework, as well as our context overview to analyse how the four WE CSR initiatives conceptualize women's empowerment.

5.1 GPN Governance: Power of the Brand

In this section we analyse the actual broader GPN governance context in which WE CSR projects are sought implemented, as well as find answers to if the four empowerment CSR projects in Bangladesh have conceptualized the role of international fashion brands. As highlighted in our theoretical framework, approaching the broader move of doing CSR in GPN towards more cooperative approaches from a women's empowerment perspective enables us to analyse inherent tensions in WE CSR initiatives between narratives related to inclusion and cooperation one hand, and concerns related to outright competition and interests linked to actors' positions in GPN on the other hand. It therefore stands that brands can not necessarily execute both ways of doing CSR in GPNs if it is to serve the case of those located at the bottom. Moreover, if the four WE CSR projects are ruled out on the premises of unaltered power relations in GPNs, there might be profound limitations to what extent it serves the case of women workers in the Bangladesh garment sector.

As elaborated in our context chapter and theoretical framework, GPN governance in the Bangladesh garment industry appears to take the form of a tight and controlled relationship between the brands and its main suppliers. To a very large extent, the buyer exercise control over compliance issues and what, when, where, how and at what price their garments are, and should, be produced (McCormick & Schmitz, 2001). In a recent report, Oxfam (2014) reported how clothing brands used their power to systematically push the costs and risks of business on to producers, who in turn passed them down to women workers located at the bottom of GPNs (see also War on Want, 2011). Relatedly, the Asian Development Bank (2016) also reported that the Bangladesh RMG sector did not give the country nor the suppliers any monopoly power to dictate or negotiate prices with buyers, as its share in the global market for such exports accounted for only 5%. These views also came forward in a statement made by the interviewed international NGO,

“In terms [of] who disproportionately got the power, that would be international fashion brands who have more freedom to dictate the prices,

and dictate the production times [...]” (International NGO, personal communication, July 3, 2017).

Even with these obvious contextual evidence, these evidence are not explicitly found in our empirical analysis of the respective cases. In fact, most of the content found on the respective cases’ websites as well as in the opening statements of their reports usually begin by laying out some of the obvious problems persistent in the Bangladesh garment industry. Even though many of the problems they raise are framed as issues related to exploitation, low wages, tragedies such as the collapse of Rana Plaza, the lack of government’s enforcement in the industry, and lack of compliance and unionization in the industry, and even though the cases also talk about the issues women workers face, such as sexual harassment and right to maternity leave, hardly any report talked explicitly about who holds the responsibility of these conditions at the end of the day. Instead, the cases emphasized that despite the issues persistent in the industry, their respective CSR projects would bring about improvements and changes. In an internal report published by Case 1 for instance, not only did they outline that the problem in the Bangladesh RMG sector was related to the lack of health care services, but they also outlined how they could catalyse changes,

“The existing healthcare systems cannot provide full protection to RMG workers because there is a large-scale shortage of qualified healthcare providers in Bangladesh [...] Within this context, we see enormous potential to better leverage factory-based nurses and on-site clinics to bridge some of these gaps and efficiently link RMG sector workers, especially women, to the health products and services that they need. Right now, that potential is not being realized” (Case 1a, 2014, p. 4).

The responsibility is also not framed as belonging to the brands, nor the governance strategies undertaken by international fashion buyers, but rather shifted over to other issues. In a report published by Case 4 for instance, they stated that some of the issues found in the Bangladesh garment industry are “*compounded by the absence of effective human resource management systems*” (Case 4a, n.d., p. 4). Yet, contrasting the written documents with that of the anonymized statement tells a different story. A story that resembles very much of that previously mentioned in our theoretical framework, i.e. buyers are creating these problems through their governance strategies. The manager of the same case (Case 4) for instance admitted that,

“very few brands around the world who do things genuinely [...] they also pay a price that is much lower in terms of, if you compare to various other countries and out of this price, you expect quality, you expect on time shipment, you expect ethical business practices etc. etc. When the management or the owners of the factory gets so little, there is so much they can do in terms of translating this into better working conditions” (Case 4A, personal communication, June 15, 2017).

Case 3 also argued within similar lines, but emphasized the ‘unique’ nature of the garment industry,

“it is season oriented business. It is trade oriented business. Sometimes also the brands they keep pressuring the factories that are buying [...] and then actually the ultimately in cases you see that pressure is levied on the bottom tier” (Case 3A, personal communication, June 30, 2017).

The Thomas Reuters Foundation also conducted an interview with Anannya Bhattacharjee, a coordinator with the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), who emphasized brand’s leverage *vis-a-vis* their suppliers,

“brands have so much leverage with governments and suppliers, and they have the power to set prices” (Chandran, 2016).

This statement was also backed up in an interview with Case 2,

“A lot of responsibility of what is happening in the garment sector comes from the international buyer as they refuse to rise prices. Think about it. The factory owners have a store. If you want milk, they will sell milk. If you want eggs, they will sell eggs. So if we want better the conditions, we would have better conditions” (Case 2B, personal communication, June 5, 2017).

Following this statement it is clear that brands have the power not only to push their suppliers to deliver certain products at certain prices, but they increasingly have the power (but not necessarily the means) to improve the conditions prevailing in the Bangladesh garment industry. This was also highlighted in a report by Global Social Compliance Programme (2014), *“Brands / retailers are major influencers and can change the conversation with their supply chains [...] especially where they have leverage”* (p. 5). And brands indeed do have the

leverage: In a recent report, Human Rights Watch (2015) referred to how some brands suspended orders from the Azim Group in late 2014 as they were not respecting workers' rights, including freedom of association. However, in February 2015, the factory managers finally agreed to recognize and bargain with unions, and the relationship was re-established. Hence, if buyers did have the desire to make significant changes in the Bangladesh garment industry, then perhaps we would also see genuine improvements.

Clearly, there is lack of compliance issues being handled properly by the brands. In fact, a report on Case 1 clearly states that one of the common challenges to creating women's health program in the workplace is *"deadline pressures and financial constraints on factory"* (Yeager & Goldenberg, 2012, p. 28), and similarly GSCP (2014, p. 8) reported that *"Poor buying practices are one of the stumbling stones of CB [capacity building]"* (see also Local NGO 2, 2016, p. 62). Current CSR strategies undertaken by buyers in GPNs therefore seems to confirm Barrientos (2013) and Lund-Thomsen and Coe's (2013) findings that the cooperative model has brought limited improvements in working conditions in developing countries (AFL-CIO, 2014; Barrientos, 2013; Lund-Thomsen & Coe, 2013). In fact, even though these WE CSR projects are based on a broad-based coalition between various stakeholders to collectively find 'development oriented' approaches to work with CSR in GPNs, the extent to which issues related to compliance have been improved seems to be fairly limited. While Case 1 and 2 do not focus on this, as outlined by the local NGO of Case 1,

"Case 1 [name anonymized] is not designed to address compliance issues"
(Local NGO 1, personal communication, June 16, 2017),

Case 3 and 4 on the other hand focus on compliance issues simultaneously as they adopt a model that encourages collaboration with a range of stakeholders. Case 4 for instance puts great emphasis on that buyers and suppliers should meet international labour standards and national labour laws, including laws for sexual harassment (Website Case 4, 2017), while Case 3 puts greater emphasis on how the Bangladesh Labour Law enacts the provision of participation committee and unions (Case 3b, 2014). Yet, gender compliance issues do not seem to be well incorporated in these two programs as the focus is more on the 'worker' as explained in our case study design. And neither does it seem to be an area that Case 1 for instance works on as explained in Sida's report,

“The effects in terms of securing sexual and reproductive rights are less pronounced due to the limited focus on rights issues in the Case 1 [name anonymized] curriculum or training” (Sida, 2014, p. 6)

Moreover, from the list of stakeholders of each project, we also find that all cases have one particular stakeholder in common: international fashion brands. The reasons for collaborating with this actor may be many-fold, brands may for instance be perceived as *part* of the solution, rather than the *problem* (which has also been set out in the development-oriented CSR approach (Frynas, 2008; Newell, 2005), or the reasons may be bound to more material concerns given that brands provide the financial means and access to factories.

In relation to the former argument, the local implementing partner of Case 2 for instance clearly write in one of their reports that,

“Brands and retailers are critical to the progress of developing overall working conditions” (Local NGO 2, 2016, p. 11).

In relation to the former argument, Case 1 explains on its website that the implementation costs of their project in Bangladesh is set at a fixed costs of USD\$5,000 per factory per year (Sida, 2014, p. 30). Breaking this number down to the costs per worker it is close to USD 1 per beneficiary for the larger factories, and USD 3-5 per beneficiary for the smaller factories (Ibid.). However, a deeper investigation of brands’ net revenue contra the implementation costs shows a rather interesting picture. A brand like Bestseller (who is one of Case 1’s participating brands) for instance had a net revenue of no less than USD\$3,6 billion in 2015/16. Yet, the costs of implementation constitutes only 0,0002% of their total net revenue. In our context chapter we also highlighted that there is a big difference between what brands get, and what those at the lower parts of the GPN gets. The production costs of a T-shirt for instance was only 0,6% of a €23 t-shirt retailed in Germany (World Economic Forum, 2015). This seems to confirm our ideas made in the theoretical framework, i.e. brands are indeed the actors who gets the biggest share of the cake.

Even though this is a very small cost that the brand has to shoulder, this small amount of money nevertheless appears to be crucial in determining the extent to which the CSR initiatives conceptualize the role of international fashion brands. This is also found in relation to who sets a barrier to follow-up in these projects. As outlined in our case interviews, and in the reports analysed,

“Actually this is a challenge that because we have been working with the funding program. With the funding the program also ends. We had not any system of following up with the factories” (Case 2A, personal communication, June 18, 2017)

Case 1 also argues within similar lines,

“That is one of the biggest regrets we have, as I have. We are trying to sort that out actually to secure more funds so that we can go back to this factory and check what happen, after a year maybe or six months” (Case 1B, personal communication, June 5, 2017)

Relatedly, the evaluation report by Sida also confirms this statement,

“the limited implementation time of the project [...] makes it challenging to assess or document impact (long-term effects to which the programme has contributed) [...]” (Sida, 2014, p. 33)

While we do find clear evidence of the power of the brand in most of the cases, Case 4 in particular stands out in their opinion, as they try not to take the power of the brand for granted, as explained beneath,

“for them [i.e. brands] to work with Case 4 [name anonymized], they need to sign a partnership agreement which is a global agreement and there are certain terms and conditions which they need to agree if they want to become a Case 4 [name anonymized] partner” (Case 4, personal communication, June 15, 2017).

By contrast, the internal reports on the other cases (Case 1, 2 and 4) used rather sensitive approaches to engage with buyers, for instance by clearly outlining the business benefits. The name of Case 1 for instance is made up by three capital letters, ‘H, E, R’(i.e. HER), with the underlying meaning of, ‘Health Enables Return. This is clearly speaking to businesses while at the same time showcasing the ‘centrality’ of women. In an impact assessment, Sida (2014) reached similar findings through interviews with brands and factory management of Case 1,

“the effectiveness of the Case 1 [name anonymized] in Bangladesh is, evidently, closely related to an implementation process that is sensitive to the concerns of the factories and the brands” (Sida, 2014, p. 3).

The report furthermore outlined that brands were rather sceptic and reserved about allowing any ‘outsider’, in particular NGOs, accessing the premises. This has also been outlined in an article published in the *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*. The authors write,

“At the start of Case 1 [name anonymized], the factory managers are sceptical. First, they are uneasy about allowing a local NGO into their facilities” (Yeager & Goldenberg, 2012, p. 24).

This indicates that brands are not only concerned with ‘outsiders’, which could be researchers or evaluation teams, but also NGOs. In reference to the former, one of the initial findings of this thesis also relates to the power brands have over allowing any women worker’s voice to be heard to the outside world within CSR interventions in the first place (see also Thornhill, 2016). Such reflections came at an early stage of this research when our attempt to establish contact with one of the projects failed. Interestingly, our proposal was rejected when the brand found out that we tried to get the voice and perception of women workers about the project (Brand, personal communication, June 20, 2017). Our experience in this field has been commonly shared among other feminist scholars (e.g. Thornhill, 2016) and confirmed by one of our gender expert interviewee (KG, Personal communication, July 15, 2017).

Nevertheless, in order to ‘win’ the confidence of the buyers, Sida (2014) therefore hinted that Case 1 applied the ‘business language’, and highlighted clear business benefits of participating in the project. This business case argument is also evident in the internal reports published by the respective cases (see section 4.4). But once the projects did get access, we also find that the views of the local NGO were criticized on the grounds of representing the interests of the buyers. The former implementing partner of Case 1 for instance explained to us that the reason why she decided to terminate the contract with Case 1 was exactly because she felt ‘forced’ to represent the views of the buyer. She also directed criticism against the new implementing partner to neglecting the workers,

“[...] they are only doing kind of things which is required by the buyer or the brand [...] They are detached from the workers” (Local NGO 2, personal communication, June 26, 2017)

We will touch upon the role of NGOs in section 2.2.

What we can draw from these evidence is that while brands may be providing the financial resources to implement the CSR projects, they are also ‘pulling’ back in the sense that they are not changing their purchasing practices, and at the same time they are also demanding that the projects are implemented in a way that represent their views. As explained by case 4,

“Brands have a lot of power because it is like the carrot and the stick analogy. They are giving all the support on one side but they are also reducing the stick in the sense to tell the factories ‘you must do it, if you do not do it, I will withdraw the order, or I will reduce the orders or downgrade you” (Case 4, personal communication June 15, 2017).

These evidence have implications for how women’s empowerment CSR projects are ruled out, because even though WE CSR projects in the Bangladesh garment industry have, in theory, adopted an approach to CSR in GPN based on joint actions (cooperation paradigm), in practice, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that international fashion brands in the Bangladesh garment industry have fundamentally revised or integrated better purchasing practices, let alone altered power relationships in GPNs (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). Thus, cooperative approaches from a women’s empowerment perspective showcase tensions in WE CSR initiatives between inclusion and cooperation one hand, and concerns of competition and interests to actors in GPN on the other hand.

In sum, building on the compliance and cooperative paradigm, we find that Case 3 and 4 do have compliance issues incorporated into their projects. These issues are however not related to the issues women workers face as such, as the focus is more on the ‘worker’. Moreover, there also seem to be little evidence to argue that power relations have actually been altered in favour of those located at the lower end of the network. We find that while brands exercise their power over how WE CSR projects should be designed, for instance by the means of providing financial resources and access to factories, local NGOs also have limited influence as they act in accordance with brands’ request. Although we do not find explicit statements about the role of international buyers in the respective cases internal reports, besides them being crucial in fostering the ‘change’, our empirical data nevertheless shows that most of the projects have conceptualized the role of international buyers and recognized their leverage to an extent that they seem to dictate how the projects should be implemented, especially as they

are the one's providing the financial resources as well as access to the respective factories. Thus, the power of the brand remains the base against which CSR is ruled.

An alternative way of undertaking CSR strategies in GPNs in developing countries could be by combining the traditional code implementation auditing to provide top-down pressure on manufacturers to improve conditions, while at the same time training workers to become aware of their rights. This would simultaneously allow for effective bottom-up pressure to receive safe working conditions (Lund-Thomsen & Coe, 2013). Theoretically speaking, this would call for a new paradigm for doing CSR in GPN, a paradigm that yet seems to be recognized, especially in the Bangladesh garment industry where the focus has either been on compliance issues (e.g. after the collapse of Rana Plaza there has been a rise in safety and occupational health initiatives), or cooperative methods of doing CSR (such as that of women's empowerment projects).

We summarize our empirical findings of this section on the basis of the similarities and differences between the four projects studied in this thesis,

Table 8: Power of the brand in WE CSR projects

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4
CSR strategy in GPN	Cooperative	Cooperative	Cooperative-compliance	Cooperative-compliance
Conceptualize the role of international brands in empowering women	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially
Unaltered power relations	No	No	No	No

The table shows that whereas Case 1 and Case 2 have adopted a cooperative way of doing CSR in the Bangladesh garment production network, focusing exclusively on training and capacity-building, Case 3 and 4 have adopted a new innovative way of doing CSR in GPNs: They have adopted an approach to women's empowerment that both includes training *and* compliance with international stands such as ILO and national standards set by the government. In reference to whether the cases have conceptualized the role of international fashion brands, the answer seems to be yes, with the exception of Case 4 who sets the conditions of the partnership - and not the other way around. This also means that when the power of the brand is strongly positioned and deeply ingrained in Case 1, 2 and 3, then it becomes difficult to shift power relations to lower key actors. This also accounts for Case 4,

as they are not at such unfaltering power relations by applying less sensitive approaches to engage with them,

Given our evidence of international fashion brands' dominant power and position in the Bangladesh garment industry, it is therefore crucial that we further explore the receivers of these CSR initiatives and their power and participation in CSR (hence the focus on labour). The interest is therefore on whether this leading role of brands give space to other actors (here workers) and 'push' for the voice of the receiving beneficiaries in the design, execution, and implementation of women's empowerment CSR projects. Analytically speaking, this imposes us to investigate who gets to participate in the design and execution of WE CSR projects, and to show the differences and similarities between the cases studied in this thesis.

5.2 Power and Participation in CSR: Lack of Women Worker Voices

Drawing on our case studies, in this section, we analyse how international buyers are executing their dominant role in relation to other actors of these initiatives while undertaking women's empowerment CSR project. More specifically, we look at relevant actors and relationships that separately and/or together collaborate, compete and communicate across the Bangladesh garment industry, and analyse whether the leading role of brands give space to other actors' (here women) power, participation and voice in the design, execution, and implementation of women empowerment CSR projects, and how this may be different and/or similar between the four projects.

Our empirical data shows that all four of the CSR projects have adopted a rather top-down approach to implementing their CSR initiatives when it comes to the workers, but in varying degree. Whereas the findings of section 5.1 may also be understood as buyers adopting top-down governance strategies, in this section we also see the potential of investigating this top-down approach by analysing the extent to which women workers have a voice to take part in such projects. This is because if WE CSR projects are implemented in a top-down manner, then it leaves limited space for the voice of women workers.

Our empirical findings first show that the stakeholders involved in the design of these CSR projects are mainly actors from the industrialized countries such as international fashion brands and the cases themselves. Secondly, even though local NGOs are executing the projects in practice (for Case 1 and 2), thus indicating the presence of Southern oriented

voices, in an evaluation report Sida (2014) however stated that for Case 1 this did not give space for the beneficiaries to influence the project,

*“The project implementation allows for only limited influence of the beneficiaries on the project [...] and the project’s content, thereby limiting the level of accountability and participation [thus the project] only offers participation in the implementation but not in **shaping** the content” (emphasis added)(Sida, 2014, p. 38)*

Indeed, on their website, Case 1 even stated that when designing the health-focused project, on the local level they only engaged with factory management, clinic staff and welfare officers (Website Case 1, 2017). This implies that they are neglecting the workers whom the intervention is developed for. This has serious implications for the voice and participation of workers, as the workers may not in fact align with the interests of the brands and the cases. The latter, came forward in an evaluation report conducted by FHI360 (n.d.) on Case 1’s project on financial inclusion of low-income workers. The report outlined that,

“In Bangladesh, most garment workers receive their salary in cash. It seems they are comfortable with this process because it gives them immediate access to their pay. Changes to this process may face opposition from some workers” (FHI360, n.d., p. 5)

This opposition has in fact been recognized and confirmed by some of the case interviews conducted in this thesis. In the eyes of Case 1B for instance, workers were cited to feel forced to implement such CSR initiatives,

“people are afraid of change. We are trying to shift them from a cash pay-system to a digital system [...] They are like most people they do not want it and they are afraid of it: starting [all the way] from the workers to [the] manager [...] Everyone is saying, ‘no, no, no, we do not want to that, we are happy with cash, we are happy with cash’” (Case 1B, personal communication, June 5, 2017).

The internal reports found on all cases also do not focus on ‘whether to implement this CSR project’, but rather on ‘what has the outcome been’. Consequently, this limits the participation

of the ‘outsiders’ and ‘beneficiaries’ in the design of the project altogether, especially as the design of the CSR projects are pre-developed (Sida, 2014).

Contrasting our cases against each other, we do find that there are some basic differences between how the four cases design and implement WE CSR project. Unlike Case 1, Case 2 operates outside factory limits and is voluntary in nature, thus neutralizing the extent to which it is ‘imposed’ onto the locals. By contrast, Case 3 and 4 seem to ensure that there is a genuine interest from the local side to collaborate in order to improve the conditions of the ‘sticky floor’. They do so by meeting the local factory to decide on common business issues inhibiting the functioning of the factory that *they* would be interested in improving together (Website Case 3, 2017). Case 1’s approach is different in that sense as they engage with factories to ‘prepare’ them for the implementation. Case 3 and 4 on the other hand do not enter into an agreement with international buyers before they know that the supplier has a genuine interest to participate in the project. As the country manager of Case 3 explains,

“We really explore the interests from the factory management to adopt it and to feed it into their management practices, and only when we are convinced, then actually we include them in our program” (Case 3A, personal communication, June 30, 2017).

This was also supported by their document released,

“The Case 3 [name anonymized] team will have an in-depth discussion with the supplier to understand and identify: current structures and functionality of existing workplace communication mechanisms, supplier perceptions of how these current systems function, and their expectations from joining the [name anonymized] programme” (Case 3B, 2014).

Similarly, we also showed in section 4.1 that Case 4 made the brand sign certain terms and conditions before they were willing to implement it, thus indicating that they did not take the brand's ‘power’ to pertain their project as such. What is furthermore interesting about the manager of Case 4 is his experience: Previously he worked in a brand and could clearly see that he was having a very top-down approach to CSR. But now, working in this project, he seems to have realized the benefits of adopting a more bottom-up approach. He explains,

“So when I look back at on what I was doing, and what I am doing now, I feel see now that I am looking at things from a very hands-on perspective, whereas when I was working in a brand, I was only looking at it from a top down approach, not really from the bottom-up approach” (Case 4A, personal communication, June 15, 2017).

These evidence seems to indicate that at least some of the projects have adopted a top-down approach to CSR in the Bangladesh garment industry. Besides that some of the projects are not well received on the local level, one important finding is that even though Case 3 and 4 did in practice involve the management team in the design of the project, none of the cases actually included women workers themselves. The lack of women worker representation is especially surprising from the perspective of Case 1 and 2, as they both claim to tailor programs to fit the specific ‘needs’ of women workers. These specific needs however are addressed with the help of local implementing partners, whom the projects assume can represent the voice and needs of the women workers themselves. Indeed, a handful of the trainers in these NGOs have been garment workers themselves (Websites local NGO 1 and 2, 2017), and therefore they are familiar with the struggles that women workers face on a daily basis. However, as outlined in our theoretical framework, filtering fringe stakeholders experience through others is particularly dangerous as it obscures the voice and participation of women in CSR led initiatives (Auret & Barrientos, 2004; Utting, 2007). In fact, what we find is that these NGOs train garment workers in gender-sensitivity areas through workshops and flip charts, power point presentations, and videos, all of which are very much Western ways of teaching.

The literature has also emphasized that NGOs may be co-opted into the worldviews of corporate managers, losing their critical approach and independence in instances where they come to rely on financial contributions for MNCs to undertake their work (Murphy & Bendell, 1999). As outlined in section 4.1, NGOs do in fact receive a handful of money to undertake the project. Case 1 writes on its website that the money is “*given directly to the local NGO implementation partner*” (Website Case 1, 2017).

Perhaps one of the best examples we found in relation to NGOs co-optation was when the previous implementing partner of Case 1 terminated its contract with a third party. According to her, she did not want to work with Case 1 anymore as she did not believe that the money was going to the workers directly,

“I told him I am not going to work with you anymore [...] Sometimes international money is coming for us, but most of the money goes for their administrative and other posts [...] They are getting also a lot of money from the BFID, Canadian, Sweden, Swiss, everywhere. But you know, they are only giving a small amount [of] money which they got from the buyer” (Local NGO 2, personal communication, June 24, 2017).

This local NGO is however now working closely with Case 2, and doing some assessment for Case 3 (Website Local NGO 2, 2017). This still points us to the role of NGOs and the power they may have over lower key actors. This also chimes well with the GPN theory in which we emphasized that the governance of a network is governed not only by international buyers, but also by the horizontal context (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009) in which WE CSR projects are embedded. Therefore, international fashion brands are not the only one to blame for the design of these initiatives as highlighted by a gender expert,

“NGOs and international bodies are just as much to blame for the bad design of those kinds of programs than the brand” (LM, personal communication, July 5, 2017).

In concluding this section, we have showed how power and participation are correlated together in the Bangladesh garment production network, meaning that those who have power are usually also the actors who gets to participate, and have their voice included in the decision-making processes of women’s empowerment CSR project. While buyer’s role has clearly been conceptualized in WE CSR projects as outlined in this and the previous section, this section has also showed that local actors, here NGOs, also play a dominant role in limiting the power and participation of women workers in WE CSR projects. Thus, our findings indicate that whether power is in the hands of international fashion brands or NGOs, both actors appear to executive power over low-key actors such as women workers at the bottom of GPNs. While brands appear most present in the design of these projects, particularly with no stakeholder from the South involved in the design of the projects, the NGO’s role and power is executed in ‘stage two’ - the implementation and execution process for which the views and interests of the workers are neglected at the expense of the views of the brands (e.g. due to financial resources). Thus, even though these initiatives claim that women workers have an influence and agency within these CSR efforts, women are both neglected as potential stakeholders and are rarely given any voice. This also chimes very well

with the discussion outlined in our theoretical framework, i.e. that certain stakeholders (here women workers) are missing from the discussion altogether (Lauwo, 2016: 1; Giuliani, 2016; Marshall, 2011; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2016).

It therefore follows that in the case of the Bangladesh garment industry, CSR initiatives seems to embody particular values and norms that tend to produce hierarchies for individuals and companies in global production networks (de Neve, 2009) where the negotiation and bargaining power of various ‘fringe’ stakeholders, here women, quickly becomes very weak, particularly as some NGOs (here NGO 1) seems to take over the role of international buyers in the execution process. This also chimes well with the GPN framework which emphasizes that in practice lead firms cannot govern their network alone as it is ‘spread’ out to different actors that separately and/or together collaborate, compete and communicate across the continuum (Bair, 2008; Barrientos, 2012; Barrientos et al., 2003; Pelger & Knorringa, 2007; Rainnie et al., 2011). In this particular case, it is not spread out to the women beneficiaries themselves, but rather to the local NGOs.

In summary, we can therefore state that the power over regarding the position, voice, inclusion and participation of women within WE CSR project is fairly limited, if not completely absent. The participation in terms of voice and decision-making has not been democratized in the hands of women workers - whom the intervention is developed.

We summarize our empirical findings of this section on the basis of the similarities and differences between the four projects studied in this thesis.

Table 9: Women Worker Voice in WE CSR projects

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4
Power and Participation in CSR	Lack of women worker voice	Lack of women worker voice	Lack of women worker voice	Lack of women worker voice

In relation to the differences and similarities between the cases, our empirical data shows that all of the projects have fundamentally failed to regard women as potential stakeholders in the design and execution of women’s empowerment CSR projects. While Case 1 and Case 2 in particular emphasize the importance of including local NGOs, and thus from whom the voice and needs of women workers are filtered through, Case 3 and 4 do not engage with NGOs as they have their own local team developing training and doing the execution.

5.3 Labour Agency: Lack of support to Trade Unions

As outlined in our theoretical framework, one of the factors that might facilitate labour agency in Bangladesh's garment GPN is the existence of local trade union that could potentially help workers to organize collectively and demand in relation to the management of the factories (Booth, 1995). By being involved in collective bargaining committee, workers can raise their voices on issues and problems they face in factories so that their challenges can be solved quickly and ethically (BILS, 2009). This also creates space for other workers to go with their concerns to someone they can trust and relate to (Progress Report Case 3, 2016). In our theoretical framework we highlighted that labour agency is of paramount importance for workers to challenge the status quo, power relations, and the subsequent structure of inequality both at the individual and collective level, rather than engaging in small strategies of 'coping' and 'getting by' with their everyday challenges, or by simply redistributing resources 'better' in the existing system (Katz, 2004). One way of doing this is through trade unions. However, as emphasized earlier, the number of unions are comparatively low in developing countries (ILO, 2000; Mishra, 2001), and they may also be political, thus increasing the possibility that officials get tempted to represent their own or their employer's' interest, thus limiting the potential for labour agency in such settings. Alternatively, trade unions may also be a component which our studied interventions may not support in their policies or practices altogether, which may ultimately constrain - rather than facilitate - labour agency.

In this particular study, we find a number of barriers related to trade unions in the Bangladesh garment industry. In this section we therefore analyse what the broader role of trade unions is, and how WE CSR projects are different and/or similar in the ways they conceptualize organized labour versus individual worker decision-making in relation to improving their conditions of work. Before analysing how our four initiatives are supporting and/or constraining labour agency by supporting or neglecting trade unions, we first analyse some of the common characteristics of trade unions in Bangladesh. After all, as the GPN literature highlights, labour agency should be understood at the *intersection* of the vertical and horizontal dimensions (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009).

Trade unions in the Bangladesh garment industry seems to hold a weak position. In a newsletter produced by Case 4 for instance, it was stated that out of the 4000 existing garment factories, only 300 had registered unions (Newsletter Case 4c, 2017b, p. 5). The reasons for

this are not difficult to understand, especially given that the Bangladesh labour law requires that no less than 30% of a company's employees must agree in order to certify a union (BILS, 2009), and at the same time they must also obtain authorization from the government. In numbers, it would imply that in a factory of 30,000 workers, as many as 9,000 workers would have to sign an agreement. The lack of trade unions therefore seems to be persistent in the industry. The consequences of the lack of trade unions have also been pointed out in a report published by the Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2016). In reference to the Rana Plaza and Tazreen incidents, the report outlined that,

"None of the five factories operating in Rana Plaza had a trade union, and so workers were powerless to resist their managers [...] If the workers at Tazreen had been members of an elective union it is much more likely that staff,, would have had fire safety training and could have pointed out safety violations [...]" (HRW, 2015, p. 4).

It would be assumed by anyone knowing about the flood of CSR initiatives in the Bangladesh garment industry after the collapse of Rana Plaza that the conditions would have improved. However, as early as in July this year, yet another incident took place. A boiler blasted through a six-story building outside Dhaka, killing no less than 13 people (Paul, 2017). According to our interview with a Bangladeshi labour activist, this is linked to the direct consequences of weak trade unions in the industry. He stated that,

"The most important, the most serious problem [is the] weak situation of Trade Unions in garment. Workers can not pursue, can not assert their problems. In the latest incident, workers tried to convince the owner that this is [a] problem, 'we can not continue work[ing like this]'. But the owner insisted [emphasize] working, he insisted on them for working" (Bangladesh labour activist, personal communication, July 5, 2017).

When workers' voice are neither heard nor cared for, it is not surprising that they confine to more 'radical' measures, such as organizing themselves to improve the conditions of their work. But even when workers do this, they seem to face potentially serious reprisals. The HRW (2015) for instance exemplifies this in a few words *"Whoever raises their head suffers the most"*, and added that Bangladeshi workers are threatened, beaten and also fired in cases

they do attempt to organize themselves. This was also highlighted by the consultant of the international trade union federation,

“[when the employer] will know that now this has been filed to the department of labour, and he found out who is these guys who are doing this, and they are kicked out. Then, when the labour department come and check, then the people are not there anymore” (International trade union federation, personal communication, June 6, 2017).

The president of NGO 2 also encountered similar experiences. When she, as a worker herself in a garment factory tried to set up a union, she and her co-organizers were brutally assaulted and scores of workers fired. She explains,

“We were organizing the unionize [...] We had a demonstration, we were beaten by police, we are attacked my muscle-men, we were black-listed, we could not get job[s] in different factory” (Local NGO 2, personal communication, June 24, 2017).

In relation to the role that brands play, we also find that their own sourcing policies rarely encourage unions as part of their codes. For instance, in its codes of conducts, the Danish fashion brand, Bestseller, only mentions that suppliers should not prevent workers to join unions,

“Suppliers will allow these rights, will not interfere with workers’ unions, and will not prevent workers from joining these unions. Workers shall not face prejudice due to union membership or active participation in workers’ committees” (Bestseller Code of Conduct, 2016).

Evidently, it does not say anything about that unions are a requirement for factories if they wish to supply for international markets. This voluntary nature of CSR has also been criticized extensively during our interviews (e.g. Interview International trade union federation; Interview with Case 4A), as well as in literature, where the latter criticized codes of conduct to not have impact upon process standards such as freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining power for labour (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Bartley & Egels-Zanden, 2015; Lund-Thomsen & Coe, 2015). It is perhaps in light of these issues that the cooperative paradigm for CSR in GPN has emerged.

Having analysed the common setting in which such interventions unfold, and having outlined that the Bangladeshi context is not very supportive of trade unions, let alone the buyer, we now analyse whether our interventions then, given their focus on providing training and capacity building for workers, is in any way paving the way for labour agency, and encouraging/supporting existing unions, or by establishing unions.

Our empirical data indicates that only two of the CSR projects (Case 3 and 4) actually support and include unions in their program. For the remaining two we do not find any evidence of the slightest indication of ‘unions’ neither in their internal reports, nor on their websites (Case 1 and 2). For Case 1, the reasons for this can be found in the evaluation report developed by Sida (2014). In the report they wrote that Case 1 has been successful to build the trust of the factories and brands for three reasons, for which one of them is the intentional exclusion of unions. The report explains that Case 1 has been

*“carefully selecting and monitoring implementing NGOs, and **limiting association with external interest groups such as the unions, the state or activist NGOs**” (emphasis added)(Sida, 2014, p. 27)*

Similar evidence was found during our interviews. When we asked Case 1 and 2 for instance whether they were including unions as stakeholders or supporting and/or encouraging trade union formation, the former informed us that,

“We are not saying in our training programs, ‘oh you guys are great, very communicate, you should join the unions or start mobilizing workers [...]’” (Case 1A, personal communication, June 8, 2017).

When we sought for further elaboration and asked their direct implementing partner, she argued within similar lines,

“This is not within our jurisdiction” (Local NGO 1, personal communication, June 24, 2017).

Case 2 also emphasized that they are

“a consulting firms. Actually, we do not have any relations with them [i.e. unions]” (Case 2A, personal communication, June 18, 2017).

On the other hand, Case 3 and 4 both indicated that they either worked directly with trade unions (by building up their capacity), and in the absence of unions, they worked with the factories to elect worker representative for a committee (so-called ‘participation committee’). As outlined in Case 3’s project description,

“If participating suppliers have a recognised and registered trade union (TU), the Case 3 [name anonymized] programme will always aim to work closely with TU representatives and factory management” (Case 3b, 2014).

And in the statement made by Case 4,

“[...] in the absence of the union, we work with the factories to elect worker representative for a committee, and through that process we build capacity of worker’s representatives to represent the larger workforce. That is only in the absence of the union. If there is a union, we will build the capacity of the union” (Case 4A, personal communication, June 15, 2017).

Reflecting on why Case 3 and 4 are focusing on trade unions, besides the obvious need to represent the views of the workers could be related to our findings in section 4.1. That is, the cases are built on the idea that in order to improve and address the conditions for workers in the Bangladesh garment industry, a mix of compliance and cooperative forms of CSR are needed. As outlined in our case study design, Case 3 and Case 4 are ‘unique’ in the sense that they are cooperating both with the Bangladeshi government as well as ensuring that factories are complying with national and international labour laws. Case 4 for instance writes in a report that,

“We were always keen to broaden our involvement in Bangladesh, but we will only intervene if certain conditions are in place. One of them is the legal requirement for openly elected worker representation on worker-management committees. So, we made the case to the government. Ultimately, they changed the law and we saw our chance to act” (Case 4a, n.d.)

The driving force of these two programs is furthermore that compliance with national and international labour laws will develop a model of social dialogue that will eventually make a platform for workers to negotiate about their rights collective and resolve conflicts

“peacefully” (Case 3b, 2015, p. 1). While workers may have better opportunities to negotiate *vis-a-vis* their employers about their workplace after the implementation of the program, it is however noteworthy that Case 3 believes in peaceful resolutions. As Katz’s (2004) categorization would remind us, the idea of resistance is itself built on the notion that workers undertake *outrights* resistance strategies to improve their conditions of work. This was also highlighted in Case 3’s internal report,

“A wave of wage strikes in December 2016, for example, largely in factories with no trade union presence, highlighted again the fact that often strikes and other forms of dispute are the only means for workers to raise their grievances, in part because some employers retaliate against union organisers and workers trying to organise” (Case 3a, 2017, p. 2).

However, looking at some of their achievements the both cases have been able to achieve thus far, we find that most of the issues are not linked to challenging relations through attempts to develop alternative systems of production and social reproduction that provide workers with greater control of their labour time and its use (Katz, 2004), rather it seems to be about how workers are using the knowledge gained through training to improve their living conditions in ways that **redistribute** resources and ensures better conditions at work (i.e. ‘reworking’ strategies). This is for instance related to Case 4’s achievements of,

“medical wards and childcare facilities, terms and conditions of employment have become clearer in most of our factories, and legal limits on overtime hours have been monitored” (Newsletter Case 4c, 2017b, p. 4).

We summarize our findings beneath,

Table 10: Support to trade union in WE CSR projects

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4
Labour Agency conceptualized as	Individual	Individual	Collective	Collective
Labour agency in Kat’z terms	Reworking	Reworking	Reworking	Reworking
Support of trade unions	No	No	Yes	Yes
Support of participating committee	No	No	Yes	Yes

The table shows that in the Bangladesh garment industry labour does not have space to define its own role in negotiating for better conditions at work. The trade unions in this industry are few, and legal requirements makes it difficult to form and/or join unions, especially as existing unions are affiliated with political parties. At the same time, even when workers do try to mobilize they face severe reprisal by factory management. The space for existing trade unions to exercise their influence via collective actions efforts within this context therefore seems to be inhibiting. In relation to the projects studied we also find similar evidence, but findings that nevertheless explain the circumstances more in-depth. More specifically we find that Case 1 and 2 do not conceptualize the role of labour agency as a collective workforce. Case 3 and 4 on the other hand have evidently conceptualized the role of labour agency as organized labour decision-making in relation to improving their conditions of work.

However, despite the latter two cases efforts of organizing workers collectively, neither of the cases are directly challenging the existing relations through attempts to develop alternative systems of production and social reproduction that provides labour with greater control of their time and its use. Instead, workers have been given the chance to ‘reform’ the existing system in ways that redistribute resources to ensure better conditions at work (Katz, 2004). This is related to workers options of joining participation committees and negotiating with their management about issues they value - but still within the system. Reflecting back on our findings in the previous sections, this system could be argued to be severely influenced by buyers’ governance strategies that has limited the extent to which the projects themselves, let alone the implementing NGOs, can actually challenge the structural inequalities persistent through buyers purchasing practices, especially as the cases are reliant upon buyers participation and financial resources (see section 5.1).

These evidence then becomes the context for labour agency in Bangladesh which de-facto determines how labour agency - in the case of women - are likely to shape the projects. We explore this in section 5.4.

5.4 Women’s Empowerment

In this section we analyse how women’s empowerment is conceptualized within the four CSR projects in the Bangladesh garment industry, and how these are similar and/or different from one another within the projects.

5.4.1 The business case

As outlined in our theoretical framework, the win-win of women empowerment has become a well-worn rhetoric in a number of CSR initiatives, which aims at empowering women workers in the Bangladesh garment industry. But even though such initiatives aim to lift women, families and communities out of poverty, with the idea that empowering women will ‘unleash’ their ‘locked’ potential, corporate-led CSR initiatives have been heavily criticized on the grounds of the business case (Bexell, 2012; Prügl, 2015). In particular, critics have voiced their concerns that empowerment is more pronounced focus on the win of the businesses rather than that of women workers (Dickens, 1998). This is happening in an era where there appears to be compelling grounds to argue that the structural and institutional factors that make women face multiple economic, social and political inequalities are conveniently erased from the 21st century narrative of women’s empowerment (Cornwall, 2007; Koffman & Gill, 2013; Roberts, 2015; Wilson, 2011). In this section we therefore analyse how the business case argument has become one way of conceptualizing women’s empowerment in the four cases studied, and how this may be similar or different from one another within the projects.

Our empirical findings indeed indicate that the business case argument and the win-win rhetoric is present in all four cases with varying degrees. We also find that the focus on the win for women, and the win for businesses is varying across the cases. When comparing the vision of the four cases, we notice that while Case 1’s mission juxtaposes the business interests to that of the women’s by stating “*Empowered Women, Dignified Work, Better Business*”, Case 2’s mission statement only talks about “*improving conditions for workers by providing win win solutions that work for businesses and for workers*”. By contrast, Case 3 and Case 4’s overall vision and approach puts a stronger emphasis on the workers as such. Case 4 for instance does not mention businesses at all in their mission statement “*Our vision is a world where all workers are free from exploitation and discrimination, and enjoy conditions of freedom, security and equity*”. This however does not imply that Case 4 does not prioritise women’s empowerment, but that it perceives women’s empowerment as a part of its holistic approach towards improving the relationship between employers and employees. Finally, Case 3’s strategy and mission does not focus on the business win as such but rather explains their engagement with businesses in improving the conditions for workers, “*We encourage factories to improve working conditions*”. From these statements, it becomes clear

that Case 1 (the women oriented case) makes the strongest link between business performance and women's empowerment. This is also evident as Case 1 is the only project that has persistently referred to women in the South as the new 'public' face of international development by reminding us that, "*women support their communities, repay their loans faithfully, and provide exemplary leadership*" (Case 1b, 2010, p. 1).

Aligned with this view, the international manager also advocated for the business case by outlining how women and gender are linked,

"[...] it really stands [that] we see the business benefits of women's empowerment [...] here we talk about business benefits, or business case, there is nothing [emphasize] better than linking your performance on gender to orders, how much orders that you are getting" (emphasis added) (Case 1A, personal communication, June 8, 2017).

Indeed, most internal reports on the work of most of the cases is 'speaking' to businesses about the win in investing in women. For instance, an internal report produced by Case 1 focusses on health as the "missing opportunities within health investment in the RMG sector" (Case 1a, 2014, p. 1), which directs us to the missing opportunities for businesses to improve the health of women workers as described beneath,

"If women and men working in the RMG sector are healthier, they will be able to earn more, invest more in their future, and share more benefits with their families and communities through remittances. Healthier workers will also be more productive and will support the continued growth of Bangladesh's RMG sector" (Case 1a, 2014, p. 15).

The following quote imposes us to dig deeper into the nature of the issues tackled, and the issues disregarded under a business case setting. From our empirical data it seems as if many of the issues tackled by the projects, and thus the ones that are most 'successful' for the businesses, often have direct business benefits. For the particular case of Case 1, the project speaks the language of 'empowering women' but does so with regard to health,

"the business case for health and reduced absenteeism is evident" (Case 1A, personal communication, June 8, 2017).

This is also true for Case 2, as outlined on their website,

“Workers’ awareness of key health knowledge around drinking, diet and common diseases has improved. In particular, the number of workers who report drinking two litres of water or more per day has jumped from 42% to 99%” (Website Case 2, 2017).

Moreover, Case 3 and 4 also seems to have this component incorporated into their program, albeit it does not remain the core focus. Case 4 has for instance announced, ‘upcoming event’ on its website, from which we can see that on the 8th and 9th of November this year, training will be provided to those elected in participation committees with the following goal,

“the goal of the project is to raise awareness among workers about family planning, hand washing, parenting, family health and female menstrual cycle” (Website Case 4, 2017)

Receding to a program in which health of women is praised is however not directly the responsibility of the business as such but for which the business case appears to be strongest. Investigating some of Case 1’s other projects also shows that one of the most controversial program is the one which the root causes of women’s issues is actually tackled, that is, violence against women. For this particular program, the suppliers do not see the direct benefits, implying that the business case argument is not necessarily the strongest for this project as outlined in an interview with Case 1,

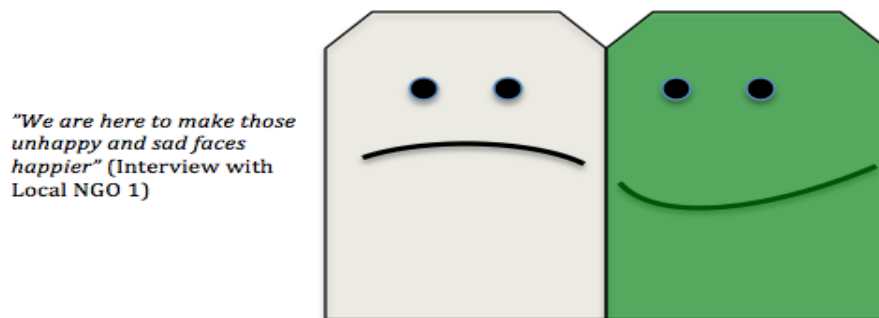
“The supplier does not see the direct business effect in engaging with violence” (Case 1B, personal communication, June 5, 2017).

According to their own website, the number of women workers who they have been able to reach through their health project globally (250,000 low-income women workers) is comparative higher *via-a-vis* the numbers reached for the finance program for instance (10,000 low-income women workers). We however do not find any specific outcomes of the Violence program (Website Case 1, 2017). This clearly shows that the WE CSR initiatives are fairly limited to projects that have clear business benefits.

To support this further, it is possible to look at the measurements used by all initiatives in assessing the extent to which women workers have been empowered. Three out of the four initiatives interviewed reported that they used quantifiable indicators related to less turnover rates, reduced absenteeism, and spending and saving patterns to measure empowerment. This

is despite the fact that feminist scholarship contends that empowerment is not something that can be measured (Kabeer, 2003). Such measures have also been persistent throughout the respective cases internal reports. When asked about the win for women themselves, Case 3 for instance kept referring to positivist studies correlating a happy woman worker with increased effectiveness at work to argue for the importance of their initiatives for women, all while the implementing partner of Case 1 was emphasising the same idea by referring to its logo (see figure 5 beneath).

Figure 5: Logo of implementing Partner



Source: Compiled by the authors based on Local NGO 1's logo. Modified in the respect to anonymize the participants. Core symbol are maintained.

The quantifiable measures for empowerment has also been argued by the rest of the cases as exemplified beneath,

"In general, Case 1 [name anonymized]] is looking for quantitative data related to productivity a return from new savings attributable to the health activities" (Case 1c, n.d., p. 1)

"the indicators are mostly related to productivity, like reduced absenteeism, less turnover [and] those kind of things" (Case 1B, personal communication, June 5, 2017)

Others contended that there was a direct relationship between women's savings and their decision making at the household level (remember however that none of the projects are following up),

"If they are having more savings then that is, they are having better relationships with their managers also within this household or family members" (Case 2A, personal communication, June 18, 2017)

As highlighted in our theoretical framework, the binary view on gender has meant that women's performance and gender equality has been 'solved' by referring to visibility measures as a way to advocate for the business case (e.g. Bear et. al., 2010; Fernandez-Feijoo et al., 2014).

By contrast, the interviewee for Case 4, who had extensive experience in the field of CSR and had previously held a position in a company and is now working in ILO, an organization that focuses on the 'worker', was the only one who expressed his concern and dislike of the direct assumed relationship between empowerment and business indicators. He explains,

"I do not see empowerment may be directly linked to KPI like absenteeism or turnover because those are linked to so many elements [...] Those are the different elements we need to look at, not necessarily linked to worker turnover and absenteeism when it comes to empowerment related issue"
(Case 4A, personal communication, June 15, 2017).

Yet, even though he states that their project is not using these indicators to measure empowerment, they are clearly concerned with the benefits to businesses as outlined in their newsletter. They outline in their newsletter four elements on, 'how we can help you' for which one of them is 'lower staff turnover' (Newsletter Case 4a, 2016).

In this section we have showed that one of the ways that CSR initiatives in the Bangladesh garment industry have conceptualized women's empowerment is through the business case. This is however not a unique phenomenon as it has been advocated by international institutions such as the World Bank, while at the same time being criticized by feminist scholarship (Bexell, 2012; McCarthy, 2017; Prüg1, 2015). In this context, empowerment has become a way of undertaking projects that have direct business benefits, with arguments that showcase that women too benefit from these programs. One of the common starting point of the studied initiatives is the obvious focus on enhancing women's knowledge on health. Surprisingly, this is not directly the responsibility of the business as such but for which the business case appears to be strongest. In other words, women's poor health is not something that businesses have caused as such in the first all. It is hence believed that if women eat better, are healthier, know how to use some sanitary pads, and can subsequently pass this knowledge to her co-workers, then she would have been empowered. Yet, for any feminist scholar, the win for women, and the empowerment for women, would not be on maintaining

power relations, but would rather be related to strategies that would shift power relations (i.e. giving women a ‘giving women *different* cake’ (Kabeer, 2001). It is therefore highly questionable how businesses and women can have the same interests. In our interview with the international NGO we were also told reminded of that CSR is today framed in the idea that there is no opposite interests and that,

“corporations share the same interests as the most marginalized people on the planet” (International NGO, personal communication, June 13, 2017).

This is, in itself a much contested understanding. In fact, it is highly questionable, how corporations and women workers can essentially have the same interests, when they are embedded in different contexts, face completely different challenges and have diverging interests and issues they regard as ‘problems’, and even more as section 4.3 showed that women’s voice and participation as stakeholders is severely neglected.

In the table beneath we summarize how the four WE CSR projects have conceptualized women’s empowerment in the Bangladesh Garment industry,

Table 11: The business case and WE CSR projects

Conceptualization	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4
Women’s empowerment	Business case	Business case	Business case	Business case
Indicators	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings	Turnover rates, absenteeism and savings

From this table it becomes evident that virtually all of the cases are building on the logic of the ‘business case’. They also use direct quantifiable indicators to measure empowerment and to show the business benefits of investing in women. Although Case 4 does however state that he does not see that empowerment is directly related to such indicators, their internal reports however does not tell the same story. This may imply that even though he as a person may not see this to be true, he is fairly constrained by the organizational premises of how CSR projects should be carried out in the Bangladesh garment industry.

5.4.2 Empowerment as an inside-out, individual or as a self-direct and collective process

In our theoretical framework, we highlighted that whereas empowerment as a corporate led strategy often takes the form of women empowerment coming from ‘outside’ of the women workers themselves, and is directed as an individual process, feminist scholars however

contend that empowerment comes from ‘within’ and involves workers organizing themselves through their collective efforts, with a particular focus on changing power relation. In this section, we therefore analyse how the four WE CSR projects are similar or different from one another within the projects.

All of the cases use concepts such as inequality and vulnerability to explain women’s present position and conditions in the Bangladesh garment industry. This in turn appears to be used by the cases as a way to justify for the need of ‘change’, a change that does not come from the women workers themselves, but rather from a pre-developed curriculum that has been developed between brands and the cases themselves. Case 2 for instance describes the progress of one of their projects by affirming how they are

“sparking change inside the factors ... female workers have been given a chance to work and grow their career... with the training the need to reach their full potential” (Website Case 2, 2017)

As such, the project is executed through training and capacity building showcasing that there are clear business benefits to the program, and that empowerment is an outcome of the inputs that they provide women, be it training, knowledge, material assets such as sanitary pads (e.g. Case 1 and 2), or opportunity to partake in participation committees (e.g. Case 3 and 4). Empowerment in this context therefore becomes a matter of providing information about how to deal with health issues in an urban context. A good portion seems to be about simple behavioural change, such as using sanitary pads during menstruation and making these available through the company clinics, which ultimately defines empowerment as a purely individual matter. This also chimes well with the binary view on gender for which women empowerment in CSR has mainly focused on enhancing (women’s) individual freedom (Benschop & Verloo, 2016). Moreover, all of the initiatives’ reports are full of success stories of women improving their material conditions, community status and an enhanced ability to make and take decisions, indicating that empowerment is an outcome. A typical narrative found in these initiative is for instance framed as,

“This project provided us with knowledge which gave us power. It enhanced our self-confidence and built more trust between us and others” (Investing in Women for a Better World, Yeager, 2011, p. 9).

Case 2 also showcased similar narratives,

“I have asked my husband to give me 50/100 tk daily. I have started to save this money and saved 1000 tk within 2 weeks” (Website Case 2, 2017)

This appears to indicate that different dimensions of needs are being addressed and women feel empowered in different ways. While there may be some truth to this, it is very much an organizational and linear illustration of how change takes place, indicating that empowerment is seen as an outcome (cf. Rowlands, 1998), and obscuring the fact that progress in one area can be hampered by lack of rights in another. The local NGO for instance already assumed that there are Bangladeshi women out there, who can be empowered,

“we have already assumed that there are workers, women workers, who can be empowered and they can share their knowledge with their peers” (Local NGO 2, personal communication, June 16, 2017).

From a feminist point of view, believing that empowerment is an assumed conjecture is flawed in itself, as Kabeer (2001) would remind us - empowerment is a process where changes happen incrementally, and a process where changes happen on a long-term dimension, and not a destination per se (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010). We however find that all of the CSR initiatives do not run more than 1,5 years, and there is no budget to follow up (as explained in section 4.1), which also questions the extent to which Bangladeshi women workers are really empowered during the comparatively small time-dimension the project takes place. The reasons for not doing so may be related to the fact that corporations have a short-term focus on results (Mena et al., 2010). The longest project is that of Case 1, it runs for (only) 18 months (Sida, 2014, p. 30). In an evaluation on Case 1, USAID (2017) found that most of the changes in the factories in Bangladesh in fact took place *post*-intervention, albeit it was related to food intake and nutrition status and knowledge on sexual and reproductive health (USAID, 2017). It therefore seems imperative to broaden the time-scope of WE CSR projects, as well as to allocate budgets to follow-up.

Another finding of this paper is related to the conception of women themselves that are embedded within these projects. Drawing on our evidence, it appears that the projects have an emphasis on training individuals to become aware of and change their attitudes. The way that this is executed, i.e. how women ‘change’, is through training. This training is argued to act as a medium through which women are ‘saved’ from their ‘disadvantageous’ position in the

garment industry. This comes forward both from the evidence found above, but also from the statements made by the interviews themselves, as written in Case 4's newsletter,

*"[Case 4 has been] providing 240 female garment workers in Bangladesh with the **training they need to reach their full potential** inside their factories" (emphasis added)(Newsletter Case 4c, 2017b, p. 4).*

This training is seen as to be able to 'change' women workers so that they can reach their 'full potential' inside the factories. From this statement it could convincingly be argued that empowerment in this context comes from outside of the women workers themselves. The mechanism through which women are (allegedly) empowered is then through the training provided by them, rather than a self-directed process (Kabeer, 2003). This conceptualization of empowerment is however not unique to Case 4, but appears to be a persistent way in which women's empowerment has been conceptualized in WE CSR projects in the Bangladesh garment industry. We find various examples of this, both from the interviews conducted as well as from the respective cases' internal reports as exemplified beneath,

*"[Case 1] **unlock[s] the full potential** of women working in global supply chains through **workplace programs** promoting health, financial inclusion, and gender equality" (emphasis added)(Website Case 1, 2017).*

*"Through practical workshops, we provide training on life skills including financial management, health and nutrition, leadership and negotiation. **By gaining these important skills**, women workers in particular are more able to manage their family finances, negotiate with their supervisors for leave and benefits and develop a healthier lifestyle" (emphasis added)(Website Case 2, 2017).*

At the same time, we also note that it is women workers who needs to be trained and 'changed', and not necessarily other actors such as factory management. Indeed, Case 3 and 4 do focus on training the management team inside the factories as explained in our case study design, however the idea of 'changing' women workers is persistent throughout all cases. The local NGO for instance stated that,

*"**women** are communicating better and when **they** started communicating better the supervisors and the women they kind of are on the same page*

[...]” (emphasis added)(Local NGO 1, personal communication, June 16, 2017).

This statement about women and management being on the ‘same page’ appears to be rather contesting: As showed in section 4.2, women workers have not been granted voice or participation in the design of WE CSR projects, which makes it difficult to know what it is that they really want. This lack of ‘third-world’ voices has also continuously and persistently been scrutinized in the literature (Grosser & Moon, 2017; McCarthy & Muthuri, 2017; Prieto-Carrón et al., 2016; Thornhill, 2016).

Reflecting back on our theoretical framework, we highlighted that different conceptualization of what gender is, leads to different solutions. From the evidence found above, it seems as if the problems that women workers face in the Bangladesh garment industry is that no one has adequately ‘unlocked’ their full potential. This then becomes a matter of solving this problem by ‘fixing’ women for which corporate-led CSR projects act as a medium to ‘solve’ this untapped potential that can in turn provide win-win solutions for businesses and women respectively. Yet, even though these projects do indeed provide women with resources, access to new opportunities, opportunities they may have previously been denied, there is however a clear lack of focus on women as a collective force that can challenge the status quo and the supporting power structures embodying the design and execution of CSR led women empowerment projects. As highlighted in our theoretical framework, empowerment is concerned with challenging the *structure* of inequality both at the individual and collective level (Kabeer, 2003). Not only does this kind of empowerment acknowledge that women’s issues are not their “own issues”, it also puts great emphasis on the systemic nature of the issues and women’s collective agency to overcome such struggles (Kabeer, 2001, 2003). This implies that they do not cause the issues women workers faces in the first place. Giving women training and enhancing their knowledge on how to eat better (e.g. Case 1), how to manage finance better (e.g. Case 2), how to negotiate their terms and conditions with management (e.g. Case 3), and giving women shoes (e.g. Newsletter Case 4c, 2017) and linking this to empowerment seems not to be surprising from the point of view of how mainstream WE CSR initiatives have conceptualized the role of international brands, labour agency, and women’s empowerment more specifically. Thus, we find that such programs do indeed recede to a conceptualization of gender which becomes a matter of maintaining

established institutions to maintain the rational social order (Calas & Smirchich, 2006), rather than seeing gender as power relations which shifts the status quo.

In relation to this, our empirical data also shows that women's collective agency has in fact been neglected in these initiatives. In section 4.3 we outlined how Case 1 and 2 fundamentally failed to even consider the possibility to enhance labour's (and thus women's) agency through trade union bodies. On the other hand, Case 3 and 4 did conceptualize the role of labour agency by supporting trade unions bodies for workers collective actions, and supported the formation of PCs in absence of unions. However, as these initiatives are operating in a heavily feminized sector, one would also assume that the gender dimension of trade unions or participation committees would either be 50-50, or at best, with more women representatives' *vis-a-vis* their male colleagues, so that women themselves had a chance to raise their concerns. But when we asked about who is usually elected in these PCs we were told that,

“mostly it is men but through the initial awareness progress what we create, we encourage the workers to identify more women representation”
(Case 4A, personal communication, June 15, 2017).

Even though we agree with Kabeer (1999) that focusing on ‘counting the women’ is just one basic indicator of gender (rights) in organisations, and has very little to do with empowerment in a fuller sense (see Thornhill (2016) for critique on this), we nevertheless find it surprising that the program has existed since 2013 and (still) has not been able to change the gender dimension of PCs in the factories. In fact, if we are to analyse the wordings and pictures we find in their reports and website we are also reminded of the skewed gender balance,

*“the Participation Committee shall elect the Vice-Chairman from amongst themselves and **he** shall preside over the meeting of the Participation Committee in absence of the Chairman” (emphasis added)(Case 3b, 2014, p. 3).*

While the use of wordings may be a human ‘mistake’, our evidence indeed indicate that women workers are not elected to be the head of participation committees, despite that *“there were 40 female workers taking part in the PCs (around 45% of the total number of PC participants)”* as indicated in one of Case 4's reports (Case 4a, 2014, p. 5). On their website, they furthermore show a picture of only males with the following heading, “In Bangladesh, workers embrace factory floor democracy” (see picture beneath) (Newsletter Case 4a, 2016).

Figure 6: Workers Representatives Elections Case 4

Rasel Rana (centre), one of the newly elected worker representatives, with supporters

While it may be that men are more comfortable going with their issues to male co-workers, thus explaining the male colleagues surrounding Rasel on the image and supporting him in the subsequent election, and while women may also be more comfortable with women representatives, we find no such indication, or picture of evidence for that women workers are elected in these committees. This therefore confirms the statement that not only are unions sexist in Bangladesh (section 4.3), but so is the path that PCs are taking in this industry. Legally, there is also no specific requirement to ensure any certain percentage of women representative in PC (Case 3a, b, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that when the gender balance is unequal in PCs, women's needs and voice are hardly heard or addressed. As one international NGO explained,

"I think the unions have failed to address and I am not surprised by that given that the majority of union leadership, not just in Bangladesh but outside of Bangladesh, are men. They are opting to be supporting women, without really I think understanding the effect of these kind of labour on the lives of women [...]" (International NGO, personal communication, June 13, 2017).

By being involved in collective bargaining committee, women can raise their voices on women related issues and problems so that the barriers can be solved quickly and ethically (BILS, 2009). This also create space for other women workers to go with their concerns to someone they can trust and relate to (Progress Report Case 3, 2016). Otherwise,

“if there is no gender balance in factory level union leadership [...] then the voice of the major portion of the labour, the women will remain unspoken” (NGWF, personal communication, June 18, 2017).

This was also highlighted by Oxfam (2004),

“But women workers’ rights and status will still not be secured until their freedom of association is assured and their voices are more widely heard” (p. 18).

But in cases women do organize however they also appear to face severe consequences (HRW, 2015), as further explained by the international NGO,

“I think what people are talking about is the push-back, the workers particular, the women workers get on the factory floor when they try to organize. That is daily, that is the situation that they face, like they are getting harassed inside the factory for being the once leading any kind of collective action and they [are] getting followed home or harassed physically or sexually on their way home” (International NGO, personal communication, June 13, 2017)

Such findings have also been highlighted by Ahmed (2004), who argued that women have been reluctant to unionize, and have been excluded from the exclusively male trade union movement. In his research in the Bangladesh RMG sector, Dannecker (2000) also reached similar conclusion and argued that workers were well aware that unions and federations usually only advance male interests: either those of male workers, or the male leaders of the unions and federations themselves. As pointed in our theoretical framework, feminist scholars believe that it is highly crucial that women get a space to act together to their own interests and to challenge social inequalities (Agrawal, 2001). Stories of women coming together and challenging the system have been recorded (Jayawardena, 1986), and emphasis has been stressed on the importance of being solidar to that particular type of agency by facilitating ‘unionization’, often the ones that conflicts with the system. This however, seems to be missing from the agenda of the 4 cases studied. Case 3 for instance is against unrestful revolutions (Executive Summary, 2017). And as Case 1 and Case 2 judged it out of their ‘jurisdiction’, Case 3 and Case 4 are noteworthy in their focus on social dialogue in a form that is between the employer and the employees and not among women as such.

Reflecting on why the facilitation to unionization is missing would impose on us to reflect back on the fact that women's agency is shaped by the governance of these initiatives, the local socio-economic context of work and employment manifested in the gendered nature of work, which all questions the extent to which CSR can really serve the 'gender case' over the business case. As such, women workers appear to be adopting strategies of individual agency rather than changing and challenging the 'fixed' capitalist system.

We summarize our empirical findings of this section on the basis of the similarities and differences between the four projects studied in this thesis,

Table 12: WE in WE CSR projects

Conceptualization of Empowerment	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4
Individual vs. Collective process	Individual	Individual	Collective	Collective
Top-down vs. inside-out and self-directed process	Top-down	Top-down	Top-down	Top-down
Understanding of women as	Need of saving	Need of saving	Need of saving	Need of saving

In summarizing this, we can state that women's empowerment initiatives in the Bangladesh garment industry have receded to the mainstream World Bank conceptualization on how women's empowerment initiatives should be understood and implemented. The four initiatives in this study have conceptualized women, as something needed to be fixed and saved, only to serve the agenda of businesses - the business case. Even though these initiatives are advocated as doing good for women workers, from a critical point of view it seems inappropriate to recede that 'empowerment' is something that can be done 'on to' people, when the roots of empowerment remind us that it is a self-directed process coming from within. The way that women's empowerment has thus been conceptualized for Case 1 and 2 in particular appears to go well with the idea that empowerment is individual. Clearly, it seems contesting how eating better, increased savings, or better health can, at the end of the day change power relations, and how women can do this individually. We do however find that both Case 3 and 4 do indeed focus on forming PCs (in the absence of unions), yet the gender dimension of these are lacking, thus questioning the extent to which it really serves the agenda of women workers, and how women can actually collectively fight for their own rights. If gender was instead conceptualized in these projects as 'power relations' the focus

would be on changing such power relations, and not on maintaining it. It would furthermore question organizations and not focus on fixing women workers. However, none of the four initiatives have drawn their attention to this.

5.5 Summary

We summarize our empirical findings on the basis of the similarities and differences between the four projects studied.

Table 13: Summary of findings

Conceptualization of X embedded into the project	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4
GPN Governance	- Power of the brand	- Power of the brand	- Power of the brand	- Power of the brand
Power and Participation in CSR	- Lack of women worker voice in the design and execution of WE CSR projects	- Lack of women worker voice in the design and execution of WE CSR projects	- Lack of women worker voice in the design and execution of WE CSR projects	- Lack of women worker voice in the design and execution of WE CSR projects
Labour Agency	- Lack of support of trade unions	- Lack of support of trade unions	- Supports trade unions and/or PCs	- Supports trade unions and/or PCs
Women Empowerment	- Business case - Fixing women/ top-down outside-in process - Individual - Outcome driven	- Business case - Fixing women/ top-down outside-in process - Individual - Outcome driven	- Business case - Fixing women/ top-down outside-in process - Collective (but lack of women representative) - Outcome driven	- Business case - Fixing women/ top-down outside-in process - Collective (but lack of women representative) - Outcome driven

As illustrated in table 13, we can refine some of the factors that have an impact on the conceptualization of women's empowerment,

- a) Power of the brand
- b) Lack of women worker voice
- c) Lack of support to unions

While these three have been presented independently during our analysis, it is however important to note that the power of the brand (a) and the CSR strategies undertaken in GPNs will inevitably have an effect on women's inclusion in these projects (b), and the issues tackled by the initiatives (e.g. Human resources development, c). In regard to the latter we have for instance showed that international fashion brands sourcing from Bangladesh garment factories do not allow for strategies that shifts the status quo. They are for instance not requiring unions in factories, and the issues that they have deemed appropriate to be tackled by the respective initiatives also do not focus on 'resistance' neither do they embody the view of shifting power relations. This means that the power of the brand is the rule against which

CSR is ruled in this context. As we have shown, this has implications for women's empowerment that takes the shape of an overly present business interest. From a feminist perspective, the lack of inclusion of women workers, the lack of support to trade unions and the image of women awaiting to be 'saved' limit the quantity and the quality of empowerment contained by WE CSR projects.

Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

The overall objective of this thesis was to understand the conceptualization of women's empowerment that was embedded within WE CSR projects in the Bangladesh garment industry. To answer this question, theoretically and empirically, this thesis has been guided by the following research question,

How is women's empowerment conceived of and conceptualized in CSR projects that aim at empowering women workers in the garment industry of Bangladesh?

The following section outlines the findings and answers to the research question. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of these results for stakeholders (policy implications) operating on the premises of empowering women workers in the Bangladesh garment industry, and for researchers interested in exploring the concept and the underlying conceptualization of women's empowerment as part of the CSR agenda (research implications).

Women's empowerment in CSR: perpetuating power dynamics

In simple terms, the answer to our research question is that WE CSR projects conceive of and conceptualize women's empowerment in the Bangladesh garment industry in a top-down manner in which empowerment is done 'unto' women as part of an inside-out process. At the same time the emphasis is also on the individual aspect of women's empowerment where there is only space for individual worker-decision making in relation to improving their conditions of work.

In order to flesh out the reasons WE CSR projects have been conceptualized as such, we have suggested to look at some of the governing forces influencing the very conceptualization of women's empowerment. Bangladesh needs to be conceptualized and investigated through these lenses as the country, and the industry in particular, has been subject to various corporate-led WE CSR programs. Such programs usually build on the narrative that outcomes reached through joint actions are 'better' and more legitimate because they take into account the interest of a diverse pool of actors in GPN. However, as much as this may sound good in theory, what is in reality happening in the Bangladesh garment industry is far from a cooperative way of doing CSR in GPNs, especially from the perspective of the workers and

beneficiaries of such programs. More specifically, the empirical data of this thesis has revealed that there are inherent tensions in WE CSR initiatives between inclusion and cooperation one hand, and concerns of competition and interests in the market in the wider GPN on the other hand.

Women's empowerment projects conceptualized under this duality seems to be limited by the strong power and governance strategies international fashion brands undertake in the Bangladesh garment industry. All of the studied cases for instance rely on financial resources from brands, and in some cases also access to factories. By conceptualizing this role of international fashion brands as imperative, the cases studied have therefore expressed a serious interest to showcase that businesses can indeed 'win' from participating in such projects. However, the issue one might face when initiatives are too close to the brand and financed by them is that they are bound to only 'empower' women through actions fitting the interest of the brand. This ultimately limits the curriculum of the initiatives by 'how much' brands are willing to do, and what they are willing to train and build women's capacity on.

At the same time, the cases studied are also legitimizing the 'investment' in women by showcasing that the outcome of such projects are indeed a 'win-win' – a win for women and, a win for businesses. The main argument for the 'win' for businesses is largely built on premises of the business case and the indicators used to 'measure' empowerment – absenteeism, turnover rates and saving patterns. For the 'win' for women, and in line with the World Bank definition and aphorism, the cases have continuously praised women as 'capable of driving big changes' (World Bank, 2006). At the same time, they have also outlined the 'but': But women are awaiting the agent (i.e. corporations and international institutions) to unleash that potential. The issues that women are trained on for instance are issues that can change women's behaviour, implying that the problem is found within the women workers themselves. Women for instance receive information and training on how to eat and drink better, how to use sanitary pads, how to talk and negotiate with the management and how to manage finance better. As good as training and capacity building may sound in an industry that still has to overcome the tragedy of Rana Plaza, it is however a very problematic understanding of 'empowerment' itself since it presupposes a particular understanding of power as something 'held' by one group (e.g. businesses) over another (e.g. women) (McCarthy, 2017). This also echoes a recurring problem with the conceptualisation of power and agency in much CSR and development literature (Drebes, 2014). In accordance

with Rowland's definition of empowerment, such conceptualization of women's empowerment can also be criticized on the grounds that it has co-opted and bestowed the very notion of 'empowerment' itself, as it is no longer seen as a self-directed process coming from *within* women workers themselves (Brown, 2015; Honneth & Hartmann, 2006; Rowlands, 1998).

Furthermore, by perceiving women as objects that need to be saved from the conditions found in the Bangladesh garment industry also recurs a narrative in which women workers are seen incapable of suggesting alternative routes of empowerment, let alone represent their own voice and needs. This is despite the fact that the cooperative way of doing CSR in GPNs emphasizes the inclusion of all stakeholders. The empirical data obtained in this thesis has showed that none of the studied initiatives have in fact included women workers' voice and needs in the design of these CSR projects. Even though the local implementing partners are included exactly because they have context sensitive knowledge, filtering fringe stakeholders experience and needs, through NGOs can be problematic as it can dilute any chances of fostering meaningful dialogue between those located at the top and at the bottom of GPNs respectively (Auret & Barrientos, 2004; Utting, 2007). In her study of the Coca Cola 5by50 women's empowerment CSR, Thornhill (2016) also showed the clash between success stories and abstract numbers of participants reached and estimations of sales increased on one hand, and participants' experiences on the other hand.

Even if women workers wanted to negotiate for better conditions at work and enhance their agency, they appear to face particular difficulties in doing so. This is not only related to the lack of enforcement of labour laws in the industry, but intrinsically also to the lack of support to trade unions and the weak position of trade unions in the industry. But the conditions found in the horizontal context of the industry is not the only one to blame, international fashion brands and CSR projects are also as much to blame for this. First of all, international fashion brands have not made the formation of trade unions a requirement in their codes of conduct for Bangladesh suppliers. Secondly, while some of the studied initiatives have shown an interest to foster dialogue between employers and employees, these initiatives however fall short in placing more women representatives in trade union and/or participation committees. The process of enhancing workers, and thus women's, agency becomes even more cumbersome when the issues women workers are trained on are bound within the system, and do not challenge or change the structural inequalities nor the status quo persistent in the

system. Training on issues like health and financial inclusion is a purely individual matter, and something that redistributes resources ‘better’ in the existing system (Katz, 2004), rather than changing it, which ultimately maintains power relations inherent to brands located at the top of the pyramid.

Griffin and Roberts (2014, 2015) also argued that the emphasis of CSR on empowerment as an individual liberatory process and its disregard to collectivism and egalitarianism particularly serves the free market agenda, and at the same time matches very well with the needs of factories for reliable and committed workers (Prügl, 2015, p. 626). Hence, CSR used as a means to empower women stands accused of strengthening businesses’ power in the global economy (Pearson, 2007), rather than distributing it. From the perspective that gender is about ‘power relations’, disrupting the power structures and the ‘rules of the game’ is the solution to inequality. For our cases, this would mean to disrupt the ‘power of the brand’ as the base against which WE CSR projects are implemented. Yet, there are compelling reasons to argue that women’s participation envisioned in the contemporary World Bank discourse, and through the respective CSR programs, are largely limited to being consulted by donor agencies and development NGOs in different spheres, which is fairly shorthanded for women’s participation in decision making structures (Hossain et al., 2011).

Finally, a concept like ‘women’s empowerment’ take on a life of its own, influenced by various actors and historical periods endowing various meanings to the very same word (Ibid.). In Bangladesh, a country where the flood of funding after Rana Plaza has placed the country on the ‘to do’ list amongst various organizations, the meaning of empowerment has become influenced by national actors such as NGOs, as well as by the discourse of women’s empowerment on an international level. This has inevitably changed, modified, and in some instances transformed the very origin of the notion of empowerment itself. It is therefore on due time that we explore the conceptualization of women’s empowerment embedded in individual developing countries.

6.1 Implications for Stakeholders

Support for bottom-up women centered knowledge

Women workers should be **active** agents in the design of these projects. Their voice should transcend across the entire value chain. By cherishing the knowledge stemming from Bangladeshi women workers, the initiatives can become more democratic, embody the views

of women workers on ‘what the issue is’ and are therefore more likely to find a solution for this in a cooperative way. This would also disrupt the image of women as untapped resource waiting to be ‘unleashed’ through a corporate led empowerment strategy and would put forward the intrinsic issues of organizations that perpetuate inequality. From the perspective of CSR programs, these would become about ‘the actual responsibility of the businesses’ to improve working conditions in a gender sensitive manner rather and to learn how to cope with the environment and conditions surrounding them. From the perspective of women workers, women centred knowledge can be a key in altering power relations and limiting the strong representation of the buyer’s interests in these projects: participatory initiatives stemming from women workers will be, by nature, more pertinent to women and will therefore translate their interests.

Reflecting our studied cases, we note that although there is an effort to compile feedback from women at the end of the projects, this knowledge comes passively for evaluation purposes, and is highly contingent upon funding and resources. We argue that for ‘walking the talk’ of empowerment, CSR initiatives operating in export-oriented industries in developing countries should not only map out the needs of women workers in the design of the projects, but also design it collectively with women workers. CSR projects should carry their mission of ‘gathering funds from brands’ to let women shape their existing capacities.

Ways of fostering women centred knowledge are multiple. The peer-to-peer methodology adopted by Case 1 and 2 for instance may provide for such opening. Rather than using this methodology to train other women on resource development, these groups could foster the development of a collective agency and facilitate the process of collective organization. The capacity to be built is not that of women, rather that of unions to truly represent the needs of women in the workplace. Explicit support and modules on the process of building consolidated unions is highly encouraged. Such modules will create the space for women to problematize their issues. Along this line, we also view that local NGOs also have a key role to play in transcribing the voice of women workers and supporting grassroots movements. When the focus of CSR program directly targets towards the support of unions, they can play a crucial catalysing role to the shaping of that ‘space’ given their position to workers.

Parallel to this, brands, if serious about empowerment, should not only commission such projects and engage in a more participatory approach when doing so, but also consider the empowering or disempowering conditions specific to their own activities and processes. In

other words, they are exhorted to review their practices with regards to just in time delivery and prices. At the same time, buyers sourcing from export-oriented industries in developing countries could also engage in binding agreements for CSR, particular in reference to unionization. With that in place and through continuous dialogue between suppliers, support towards social protection guarantees and better wages could potentially be in place. Ultimately, this could serve as a first step towards women's empowerment.

6.2 Implications for Research

In terms of research pathways, we are clearly in need of more empirical studies that can explicate how women's empowerment CSR projects are conceptualized in developing countries. Even though some voices have theoretically criticized women's empowerment within CSR (Prügl, 2015), only few have engaged with CSR initiatives empirically to investigate the very conceptualization women's empowerment carried to those who practice and undergo CSR (for exception see Thornhill, 2016). It would therefore be fruitful to investigate the trend of women's empowerment CSR projects in GPNs from the perspective of women worker themselves. Although very much aware of the challenges that come across recording the voice of fringe stakeholders, we view it essential for the CSR and feminist scholarship to continue digging until the doors of CSR are truly democratized. We also encourage scholars to pay particular attention to the context surrounding gender issues in Bangladesh when talking about 'empowerment'.

CHAPTER 7 - BIBLIOGRAPHY

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CHAPTER 8 - ANNEX 1

Example of an Interview Guide

Interviewee Information	
<p>Interview Guide: Case 1B (Representative in Bangladesh)</p> <p>Organization: Case 1</p> <p>Location: Dhaka</p> <p>Date: June 5, 2017</p> <p>Length in minutes: 50 minutes and 42 seconds</p>	
Topic	Questions
Background Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell us about your background and what led you to joining Case 1? • How is Case 1 funded? • Who works with these women on the ground?
Corporate Social Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is Case 1 drawing special attention to women in the garment sector. What makes this sector and labour force so unique compared to others? • Following the theory of change your organization has developed, how do you ensure that no stakeholder is missing from contributing to Case 1? • Do all stakeholders have equal power and the same awareness of the necessity of ‘empowering’ women? • How is the project designed and executed? • How do you ensure that women workers voice and needs are addressed in the design of your project? • Do you work with unions? Why/why not? • Can workers decide not to participate in the project?
Global Production Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What arguments do you use to convince buyers and suppliers of this project? • Why can brands not coordinate with local NGO’s such projects themselves? What is the added value of a third-party? • How do you view the role of the buyer in this project? • Do you think that buyers’ sourcing practices is inhibiting the project to achieve certain parameters? • From a buyer and worker perspective, which one of your project is most controversial?

Women's empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case 1 aims to help improve the lives of the workers in global supply chains by developing win-win solutions that work for businesses and workers. What is this win-win for workers and businesses respectively? • Do you think the business case argument, such as lower turnover rates and absenteeism, can be used as an argument to address all the issues related to the working conditions in Bangladesh? • What does empowerment mean for Case 1? Can you give a few examples of what has been your achievements in regards to empowering (women) workers in the garment industry? • Case 1 gives women access to various resources (through training), how do you ensure that they gain agency to utilize such resources? (Can you give an example on this?) • What is the time scope of your project, and do you follow up? • Women usually have very long working hours and work up to 6 days per week, is Case 1 attempting to reduce such working hours? [compliance issues] • Empowerment is seen as an intrinsic process that cannot be bestowed by others. How is this reflected in your CSR initiative? • Empowerment is typically seen as a process, how are you monitoring such process to assess empowerment of Case 1?
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