

Report Andrew Francis Pickup Bursary Award

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Living for two months in Bangladesh has been one of the most exciting experiences I have had in my professional life. I encountered a country of contrasts: on the one hand, a booming economy is visible in the endless amounts of buildings being erected, with the high-end parts of Dhaka city filled with luxury cars and a growing middle class. On the other hand, people living in extreme poverty conditions co-exist in tandem within a few meters away from such opulence. Women, in the middle of it all, are expected to conform to a lot of social norms that limit them while at the same time placing them in extremely vulnerable situations regarding safety (economically and physically).



BRAC Centre



Fieldwork nearby Dhaka

My placement with BRAC moreover, made the experience even more exciting. BRAC is regarded as one of the most iconic NGOs in Bangladesh and has been working on diverse initiatives with the mission of both alleviating extreme poverty and empowering women. Thus I was able to work shoulder to shoulder with highly motivated staff members who I not only admired for their intelligence and commitment but for their determination to work every day with a clear intention to make their country more just. Nonetheless, a lot of the critique that we as MA students were exposed to when analysing the NGO sector, allowed me to also see their work in a critical way. Within such a context, my dissertation topic started being shaped, from a feminist analysis of women's empowerment to understanding how is it that NGOs fail to utilise such feminist frameworks in their policy design.

I was thus able to talk first-hand with women that had been trained by BRAC. For me, this has been life-changing. One thing is to 'read' while in classes about issues of child marriage, for example. But another thing is to 'hear it' from a desperate mother trying to justify why she decided to marry her

daughter to 'secure' her economically but ended up indebted for not being able to procure the dowry the husband asked from her. It was hard: putting a face and a voice to human suffering was a challenge for me. It was heartbreaking at times. But at the same time, it allowed me to remind myself that the work we can do as development practitioners must always have 'the person' in the centre of it. This experience has not only reminded me why I want to work in the development area in the first place, but has also helped me to narrow my interest in collaborating with programmes that work particularly in women's education programmes. The women I spoke to were all courageous, empowered and hopeful. I would like to be a part of that conversation in my future career plans.



Andrew Pickup's Bursary was for sure an important element of my experience. As I moved two months to Bangladesh along with my wife, the prize allowed me to pay for 1 month of rent in a small room nearby BRAC's office. This was an important element of my stay: first because it was within walking distance from my working space, and second, because it allowed my wife to navigate her way through Dhaka through nearby places where she felt very safe. She also took advantage of her time by doing one of the things she loves most: taking portrait pictures (some shown above) while she accompanied me as a research assistant. This experience will be, for both of us, an experience that has made us more human, more sensible and more prepared to face professional challenges in the development sphere in the future.



Interviewing BRAC Trainees



Fieldwork Conversations



Presenting to BRAC