

# We do it Ourselves: Nijera Kori and the Struggle for Economic and Gender Justice in Bangladesh

## EMERGE Case Study 2

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Engendering Men  
Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality

Cover photograph: Women and men landless rights groups members coming together to take action against injustice.

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# Glossary

Khasland	Government property – normally agricultural land-water bodies
Shalish	Alternative Dispute Resolution
Thana	Police station
Union Parishad	Bottom level of elected bodies
Upazila	Sub-district (Third tier of local government)

Glossary edited from Nijera Kori (2014).

# Abstract

Deep-rooted patriarchal systems uphold gender and class-based inequalities in Bangladesh, within which the issue of land distribution and use remains integral to the transformation of poverty for a large number of women and men. Nijera Kori is a national social movement organising landless people to claim their rights and challenge the discrimination that constrains their agency and development. Through qualitative research, backed up by an extensive secondary literature, this study explores how and why men and women are working together for the gender equality objectives of this movement, and how these relate to wider economic justice goals. Across two sites in Northern Bangladesh the qualitative research engaged men and women from landless groups, Nijera Kori staff, and stakeholder groups.

The data indicates that by working to raise the consciousness of, and bridge relationships between men and women, Nijera Kori's approach reflects differential entry points for analysing gendered power and the importance of synchronising work between men and women for gender equality. Furthermore, a commitment to democratic practice in the movement helps realise shared commitments to gender equity. This approach has enabled men and women to address women's rights issues, tackle corruption in public service provision and claim land rights. Domains for change reach family and community, breaking down barriers to women's participation in public life. At the household level the redistribution of caring roles among men and women has emerged and the community collective agreements on dowry and early marriage suggests a degree of normative change. This report makes recommendations that men and women's shared claims for interpersonal and political accountability through collective action are critical in enabling gender equitable pathways for economic justice.

# 1 Introduction

Strategies for mobilising men to support and strengthen women's economic empowerment remain poorly understood and thus too rarely implemented (Edström and Shahrokh 2015). This case study redresses this research gap, documenting and analysing an approach to working with men to end gender inequalities in economic life. It examines the ways in which organising men alongside women in joint struggles for economic justice can lead to transformations in patriarchal power within the home and community as well as social, economic and political institutions.

## 1.1 The gender inequalities of economic injustice

Understanding how and why economic injustice and gender inequalities remain deeply enmeshed is integral to effective programming on women's economic empowerment (Edström and Shahrokh 2015). 'Pervasive gender inequalities in earned income, property ownership, access to services and time use' continue to characterise 'women's socio-economic disadvantage', as the most recent UN report on the Progress of the World's Women emphasises (UN Women 2015: 44). Globally, women earn on average 24 per cent less than men, and yet undertake over two and a half times more unpaid care and domestic work. Where this is combined with paid work, women work more hours than men in most countries (UN Women 2015). Disparities in workforce participation are also clear: only half of women participate in the labour force, compared to more than three quarters of men (UN Women 2015: 71). Furthermore, men are twice as likely as women to be in full-time paid employment (World Bank 2014). The growth in women's waged employment tends to be concentrated in a narrow range of occupations, characterised by high job insecurity, low pay, and minimal bargaining power (Chappell and Martino 2006). More women than men are outside of the protection of laws and regulations on safety at work, minimum/fair pay, hours of work, and anti-discrimination (Razavi *et al.* 2012).

Gender discrimination within the labour market continues to assign lower paying and lower status employment to women. Relative to the jobs that men do, women's 'skills and the types of work they perform, including paid care work, such as teaching, nursing, child- and elder-care, and social work, remains undervalued' (UN Women 2015: 72). Laws or customary practices of 102 countries still deny women the same rights to access land as men (SIGI 2014). If gender gaps are narrowing in some domains, increases in wealth inequalities mean that poor women are becoming further marginalised (UN Women 2015: 44). Violence against women, as both foundation and manifestation of gender inequality, is intimately connected to their socio-economic conditions. There is growing evidence that the extent to which law and practice disadvantage women compared with men in access to land, property, and other productive resources is associated with men's greater use of violence against their intimate female partners (Heise and Kotsadam 2015).

## 1.2 Male involvement in women's economic empowerment

Demands for economic justice have often underpinned women's struggles for gender equality. Only recently, however, has policy and programming attention been given to men's relationship to such struggles for women's economic empowerment. In part, this attention has been prompted by concerns about men's reactions to programmes and policies seeking to address women's economic disempowerment.

Changes in the global economy have intensified male unemployment in many societies, not least among young men (UN Women 2015). Rates of youth unemployment are extremely high, at 13 per cent globally, and youth face higher unemployment rates than adults (ILO 2014), especially among young males (ILO 2013). The first multi-country International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) found that men's stress related to livelihood insecurity, linked to the socially constructed role of economic provider, was associated with

perpetration of violence, depression, suicide, alcohol abuse and higher rates of arrest (Barker *et al.* 2011). The relationship between restrictive definitions of masculine identity and expressions of gender inequality is complex and manifests in the lives of men and women in oppressive and restrictive ways.

Other research has drawn attention to the potential for 'crises of masculinity' among working class and otherwise marginalised men, unable to live up to social expectations of being the male breadwinner in a context of increased unemployment and reduced income (Kelbert and Hossain 2014; Kabeer 2007). In this context, patriarchal backlash from men to women's economic empowerment efforts is a documented reality. Research focusing on low-income households in the global South has revealed complex links between such empowerment interventions and women's vulnerability to violence (Kabeer 2009), with data suggesting associations of both protection and risk (Vyas and Watts 2009). Women's participation in economic empowerment activities often changes household dynamics between women and men and can result in increased stress within couples and gender-based violence. Research from Bangladesh shows that men can react violently against their perceived or actual loss of economic authority and control as women's economic circumstances and opportunities improve (Ahmed and Woodruff 2012; Ahmed 2008). One study found that violence may escalate soon after women receive credit but reduce as women participate in skills training and employment, because some male partners see that they also benefit from improved household income (Ahmed 2008). Notwithstanding this complexity, the role of men and boys has rarely been explicitly addressed within initiatives and policies for women's economic empowerment and social protection, although there is a growing recognition of the urgent need to do so (Edström and Shahrokh 2015).

The little evidence that exists on male engagement in women's economic empowerment initiatives suggests it can be beneficial in terms of more equitable gender relations at the household level and reduced risk of male violence (*Ibid.*; Kim *et al.* 2009). Research to assess a Rwandan Village Savings and Loans Scheme found that when men were engaged in group and couple-educational training alongside the scheme there were positive outcomes regarding household-level poverty, collaboration in household care activities and decision-making (Slegh *et al.* 2013). The evidence review that prefaced the design of this case study, however, noted that there is a limited focus on the household as the primary site of engaging men in women's economic empowerment, usually through group education on gender relations and family decision-making, concluding that 'evidence on effective programmes to engage men in women's economic empowerment is therefore limited' (Edström and Shahrokh 2015: 10).

Few in number, such male engagement efforts have also tended to be confined to small scale programmes providing direct financial support to women, through micro-credit and savings and loans schemes. But, as Kabeer's (2005) analysis suggests, this narrow focus on finance and credit services in relation to women's empowerment should itself be questioned. Although access to financial services can improve the economic productivity and social well-being of poor women and their households, it does not 'automatically' empower women. A recent review of six randomised control trials of microcredit programmes found that these initiatives do not lift people or communities out of poverty, although they do seem to enable more freedom in people's choices (e.g. of occupation), women's decision-making, and the possibility of being more self-reliant (Banerjee *et al.* 2015).

If, as feminists have long argued, women's economic empowerment is both the process and product of women's struggle for their economic rights (Fraser 2009), then the challenge for male engagement programming is to develop strategies that mobilise men in support of women's economic rights. In such rights-based struggles, UN Women (2015: 27) reminds us, 'economic and social rights are closely interlinked with all other rights, especially the civil and political rights *that enable women's organising and claims-making.*' There is little



documentation, however, of initiatives seeking to mobilise men in support of such organising and claims-making. This case study addresses this gap, looking at the approach of Nijera Kori in Bangladesh, which has been working with men to support women's rights-based struggles within communities of landless people for the past 35 years.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Rationale for case study

Bangladesh is often cited as a development success story. But its undoubted progress on gender equality indicators (in health, education and labour force participation) is overshadowed by the continuing reality of profound social stratification. In Bangladesh, an individual's access to 'opportunities for education, health or employment and control over resources depends upon his or her structural position. Of these divides gender is arguably the most pervasive, permeating all social institutions from the family to the state' (CiC-BD 2010: 9).

As Kabeer *et al.* (2010: 11) make clear with respect to Bangladesh, 'identity, affiliations and access to resources are defined by one's place within a social order that is largely constituted by the 'given' relationships of family, kinship, [...] and so on – "the communities of birth"'. In this context, women's struggle for their rights, economic and social as well as civil and political, is about their agency to choose social relationships based on shared values and interests, which have been termed "communities of practice" by Kabeer *et al.* (2010: 11). These "communities of practice" are places where women can nurture their personal and collective 'inner acceptance of equality', as well as being the groups through which women can take action to demand gender equality in economic, political and social domains.

Forging such "communities of practice" around struggles for basic rights characterised the social mobilisation approach of the many NGOs that emerged in Bangladesh in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including Nijera Kori. For Nijera Kori, this social mobilisation approach was closely connected to the four pillars of democracy, secularism, socialism and nationalism on which the new nation state of Bangladesh was founded in 1971. From the beginning, Nijera Kori's work has been grounded in its interpretation of these pillars, promoting freedom, equality and justice for all citizens and rejecting intolerance and persecution, including on the basis of religious beliefs (Kabeer 2015).

A large literature on Bangladesh highlights the impacts of social mobilisation organisations on the lives of the socially marginalised (Kabeer *et al.* 2010; Kabeer *et al.* 2009; Barkat *et al.* 2008; Jones *et al.* 2007; Devine 2002). These impacts include 'the analytical and leadership skills these organisations offer their members, the promotion of solidarity relationships, education about rights and entitlements and support in tackling injustice' (Kabeer *et al.* 2010: 38). With their emphasis on strengthening the collective agency of those subordinated by class, gender and other hierarchies to demand their rights as citizens, social mobilisation organisations have proven effective in empowering the otherwise disenfranchised (Mahmud and Musembi 2011). As the founder of Nijera Kori has stressed, 'other NGOs were filling the gap of state services, but not talking about entitlements and building up poor people's agency' (Khushi Kabeer, key informant interview).

With the neoliberal turn in development policy and funding in the late 1980s and 1990s, the NGO sector in Bangladesh adopted the provision of micro-credit and social services as primary strategies in their anti-poverty and women's empowerment programming (Kabeer 2003; Kabeer *et al.* 2010). Nijera Kori stood against this tide, insisting that empowerment cannot be individualised in this way but instead must be grounded in collective struggle for rights and dignity. Nijera Kori was clear from the outset that organising and claims-making

should be undertaken in “communities of practice” with the men with whom women share their lives. As Kabeer states:

Nijera Kori thus represents an organisation that defined its agenda from its inception in terms of building the collective capabilities of poor women and men to claim their rights as citizens rather than as clients, customers, consumers, beneficiaries, users, welfare dependents or any of the other “identities” ascribed to the poor by conventional development projects.  
(Kabeer 2003: 5)

A number of other studies have examined the successes, limitations and lessons of Nijera Kori’s social mobilisation approach, and in particular its work with women on their empowerment. This case study draws on this secondary literature, but addresses a heretofore neglected aspect of Nijera Kori’s work on the linked problems of economic and gender injustice, namely what this work means for, and requires of, men. In doing so, it seeks to learn from Nijera Kori’s experience of working within severely marginalised communities to mobilise men in support of women’s rights-based struggles for justice.

## **2.2 Case study research process**

### **2.2.1 Research sites and methods**

Qualitative research was undertaken in two of Nijera Kori’s working areas: Dhonbari *Upazila* in Tangail district in north-central Bangladesh; and Shaghatta *Upazila* in Gaibandha district in the north-west of the country. Nijera Kori has been working in Shaghatta since it began its activities in 1980, and in Dhonbari since 1982. These two sites were selected because of their varied geographical and socio-economic characteristics. Shaghatta is a relatively remote *char* area (*chars* are temporary or permanent coastal islands, created by land accretion and sedimentation from rivers). The people in this area live under adverse conditions, combating poverty and displacement aggravated by land erosion. In addition, Nijera Kori’s long working relationships with communities in the area lead staff to believe that the incidence of domestic violence, gender inequality and early marriage are among the highest in this region. On the other hand, Dhonbari is a small town in the plains, well connected to major cities and to the rest of the country. The people are relatively well-off and have higher education levels than their counterparts in Shaghatta, and violence against women, though common, is not as visible as in the other site.

The research team for this study was convened through the Institute of Development Studies and made up of one male and one female researcher from Bangladesh, and one international male and female. In both the sites, the research team conducted focus group discussions with staff members of Nijera Kori, landless members of the organisation (both men and women) and other key stakeholders in the area, including civil society members, journalists, academics and local government representatives. The focus group discussions for male and female landless group members were conducted separately so as to allow each group to speak about their individual and collective experiences from their own gendered positions. Each group of landless men and women represented leaders and members from different levels of the landless organisation, from general members of village committees to the president of the *Upazila* committee. The research team also conducted one-on-one interviews with staff members of Nijera Kori – two members from each site: one man and one woman – for a more comprehensive understanding of Nijera Kori’s activities as well as the staff’s personal motivations for and experiences of working with the organisation on these issues. The research team also interviewed three key informant stakeholders (two researcher/activists and the founder of Nijera Kori), at the national level. The purpose of these interviews was to triangulate learning, and contextualise findings from the research sites in relation to national policy/programming discourses on social mobilisation, women’s economic empowerment and male engagement.

**Table 2.1 Respondents in Dhonbari, Tangail**

Group	Number of women	Number of men	Total
Staff members of Nijera Kori	3	4	7
Landless group members	10	16	26
Stakeholders	2	7	9

**Table 2.2 Respondents in Shaghatta, Gaibandha**

Group	Number of women	Number of men	Total
Staff members of Nijera Kori	3	4	7
Landless group members	13	16	29
Stakeholders	1	7	8

The following four broad areas of enquiry were identified as an analytical frame within which to explore the issue of men’s engagement in change towards gender equality in the context of work with women on economic justice. This framing provided a structure for the interviews conducted with respondents outlined above:

- A focus on the problem in terms of enmeshed issues of economic and gender injustice, in relation to other forms and forces of oppression.
- A focus on the different levels at which the “problem” is expressed – from the personal to the structural.
- An investigation of how and why social mobilisation strategies have evolved to address gender inequalities within Nijera Kori’s approach.
- A probing of the ways in which, and at what levels, these strategies worked with men and focused on seeking to change patriarchal arrangements power.

Prompt questions were developed in relation to these areas of enquiry in order to guide research processes in a consistent and comparable way (see Annex 1).

### **2.2.2 Case study ethical practice and study limitations**

Informed consent was gained from all participants, including the option to anonymise contributions. The research was undertaken in the local language of research participants – Bengali – with direct translation between researchers and participants. Researchers aimed to ensure that practices were gender sensitive and informed by local cultural and social norms; this was reflected in the gendered and cultural make-up of the research team. Although this was a short case study, researching across two contexts with actors from local settings as well as with key informants who work on these issues nationally will help to strengthen the study’s reliability. A limitation of the study was that research participants were identified and accessed through Nijera Kori staff, perhaps constraining their independence. However the critically reflexive approach to the research will have helped to address this issue, in part by clarifying that this was not an assessment of their practice, but an exploration of change experienced and achieved. Given the nature of the social movement-based approach analysed in this study, there is no pre- and post intervention data with which to assess change. Furthermore, reported changes may not be validated across contexts and it was not possible in every case to triangulate positive changes across multiple data sources. The emphasis of this report is on learning, however, and therefore it is appropriate to report indicators of positive change.

## **2.3 Problem focus of case study**

### **2.3.1 Economic, social and political disempowerment of landless people**

For most people in Bangladesh, land and agriculture-based livelihoods are central to everyday life and wellbeing. About 28.7 million households, some 88 per cent of all households, are in rural areas. An FAO and UN Habitat (2013: 5) report notes that ‘[o]wnership of land determines the status of an individual in rural society. Land-rich people enjoy political power and yield considerable social influence.’ The preliminary report of the

2008 Agricultural Census found 3.26 million rural households as landless (11.4 per cent of the total rural households) and as 7.9 million rural tenant households (27.8 per cent of all rural households) (FAO and UN Habitat 2010).

Nijera Kori works to organise landless people into groups in order to claim their rights and address inequalities. Nijera Kori defines its target group broadly as those women and men who earn their living mainly through manual labour, with an emphasis on rural rather than urban areas. The organisation currently has a total of 202,077 group members, of whom more than half are women (Nijera Kori 2014). From its earliest days, Nijera Kori addressed the problems facing its landless constituency in terms of interlocking economic, social and political disempowerment (Kabeer 2003):

- **Economically**, landless people enter the labour market on highly insecure and unequal terms, without assets or bargaining power over the terms of their employment. Women's work in the informal sector is not regulated by law, and so a large number in agriculture and domestic work are unable to negotiate for benefits offered to formal sector workers (CiC-BD 2010);
- **Socially**, the landless are marginalised by 'highly unequal relationships of class and gender within which their subordinate status was explained – and legitimated – as naturally determined, divinely ordained or attributable to individual fault, fate or failure' (Kabeer 2003: 8); and
- **Politically**, the landless have little voice and visibility in decision-making bodies and processes governing the distribution of resources and the administration of community affairs.

### **2.3.2 Gender inequalities of economic injustice faced by landless people**

Nijera Kori has always addressed 'poverty not simply in terms of lack of resources but also in terms of lack of voice, agency and organisation; not simply as the manifestation of individual want but also of underlying systemic causes' (Kabeer 2003: 9). Furthermore, the organisation's analysis of economic disempowerment in relation to oppressive social hierarchies and political disenfranchisement meant that gender inequality was identified from the outset as a primary focus of struggle. It is a basic tenet of Nijera Kori's work that 'gender inequality remains central to poverty and social injustice and that patriarchy perpetuates abuse and discrimination in both public and private spheres' (Nijera Kori 2014: 9).

A primary focus of Nijera Kori's work continues to be organising landless communities to secure their access to land set aside for their use by government policy (as outlined in the 1987 Land Reform Policy and Land Reform Action Programme), including state-owned land often located in marginal areas on coasts and rivers (*khas* land) and water bodies. A recent FAO and UN Habitat report (2010: 7) notes that progress on redistributing *khas* land has been impeded by 'vested interests of the landowning class, lack of political will, [and] the inefficiencies in the way the local and national administration are organised'. The report emphasises the legal, administrative and monetary barriers to accessing the justice system that landless people face, being largely poor, isolated and often illiterate.

Landless women face further obstacles in accessing such land. *Khas* land is legally reserved for distribution to landless households, but households headed by women without a boy child (for example unmarried women or widows with only daughters or no children at all) are excluded. Women's obstacles to accessing land are also fuelled by institutional barriers to accessing bank loans (SIGI 2014). Deeply entrenched patriarchal practices and norms at multiple levels restrict women from claiming direct access to land and a share of family property, for example being excluded from title deeds and inheritance, despite their growing role in agriculture: see Annex 2 for a detailed case example on the issue of landless women's rights claims. Landless rights group members in this study identified this gender discrimination as a major priority for Nijera Kori's work:

*Even after we get khas land the women don't get access to it because of patriarchal norms. Even if the khas land is in her name, in divorce he may drive her from the home, and he will keep the land. If the husband dies then male relatives will take control, even when it is in her name.*

(Women's landless rights group member, Gaibandha)

Struggles over wages are also a major focus of Nijera Kori's work. Women's employment outside the home (e.g. in self-employed initiatives and manufacturing) has increased, but a high proportion of women remain employed in agriculture, the vast majority as unpaid family labour. In the absence of a legally-enforced minimum wage in the agricultural sector, the monetisation of the economy and the emergence of a large and growing pool of landless labour has undermined local norms concerning fair wages (Kabeer 2003). Here, too, there is a clear gender dimension to this economic injustice. National data suggests that women earn on average 65 per cent of men's wages and occupational sex segregation is very high (Das 2007). Furthermore, the longstanding intersection of class and gender hierarchies continues to demean women who sell their manual labour (Siddiqi 2009), as a women's landless rights group member in Gaibandha made clear:

*With regards to agricultural work, we struggle for equal rights to work. But when women do work there is social pressure, her character is questioned, mullahs will say that it is not respecting religious norms. They even make ludicrous arguments like – production is decreasing because of women!*

(Women's landless rights group member, Gaibandha)

Nijera Kori also supports landless communities to secure their legal entitlements to state safety net measures. Landless rights groups members outlined that government officials on government-funded projects, such as road construction, frequently pay workers less than their legal entitlement. Women from landless rights groups spoke strongly about issues of corruption in access to social welfare for poor women, as one woman from Gaibandha made clear:

*For every social security scheme there is no access without bribes. If you want your name on the lists for government job schemes, you need to pay money to be able to get any work. Not one woman who is eligible for the elderly person allowance receives it.*

(Women's landless rights group member, Gaibandha)

In response to these economic injustices, landless groups take action, including holding demonstrations, pressuring responsible officials and going on strike. Previous research shows that Nijera Kori members have been able to obtain their due as well as to negotiate increased rates of remuneration (Kabeer 2003). Landless women's involvement in such protests not only challenges class hierarchies but also patriarchal norms of female subordination and compliance, as a men's landless rights group member in Tangail noted:

*People don't have a problem with women's work in the household and in NGOs but here is only a problem when they organise in groups. Then they are branded as bad women. Those that make these statements however are those that hold the interests in the outcome that women are fighting against. Women face a lot of violent backlash in their activism.*

(Men's landless rights group member, Tangail)

As women within landless communities fight for their economic rights in the public domain, the need for change within their personal lives remains. A study of women's empowerment and paid work in Bangladesh found that support of the family is crucial in shaping women's experiences of economic empowerment and that women who do speak out and try to exercise more agency within the family often face resistance from men in their households

(Kabeer *et al.* 2011). Working with men to reduce their resistance to women's empowerment and share responsibility for household tasks has become an important focus of Nijera Kori's work.

### **2.3.3 Social subordination and violence against women**

The social subordination of women within "communities of birth" is maintained by the unequal relations of power of intersecting class and gender hierarchies, long established and deeply internalised (Kabeer 2003). Landless group members and Nijera staff explained that a patriarchal logic of domination naturalises and normalises social hierarchies:

*Women have internalised oppression to such an extent, when you tell them their rights, they say we are women, this is what our life will be [...]. They have accepted their fate, and they are therefore set that this is the way that their lives will be. So to change this is extremely important.*

(Nijera Kori female staff member in Tangail)

Dowry and early marriage continue to reinforce this sense of powerlessness for many women. Dowry has been correlated with women's experience with, and condoning of, intimate-partner violence and furthermore 'can easily render poor families destitute and has an important correlation with poverty' (Das 2007: 4). A women's landless rights group member in Tangail outlined these interlocking discriminations:

*Discrimination is beginning from within the family. The husband for example will take a good dowry, but a few days later asks for more from the partner, and her family. When she refuses him, he beats her, and then when she goes into the village leaders for help they are also male and patriarchal and so they support the husband or father, making justice not possible for her.*

(Women's landless rights group member, Tangail)

Several studies have documented high rates of violence against women and girls in Bangladesh. Data from the WHO multi-country study on domestic violence found 42 per cent of rural women reported experiencing physical assault, while 50 per cent reported experiencing sexual abuse within marriage (García-Moreno *et al.* 2005). In line with the findings of recent global analyses (Heise and Kotsadam 2015), multilevel analysis of data from the 2005 Bangladesh Adolescent Survey and the 2007 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey suggests that household poverty has a strong association with violence, finding particularly high rates of violence against women in the highly impoverished north-western districts, including one of the research sites (VanderEnde 2013). The women and girls interviewed as part of the same study emphasised that addressing poverty would contribute to preventing violence against women and called for economic empowerment strategies to enable women to claim their rights and demand justice (*Ibid.*).

The study also found that higher levels of violence against women were associated with districts with high levels of violence-condoning attitudes, in comparison to those with lower levels of violence-condoning attitudes. In the 2011 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates *et al.* 2013), one-third of women agreed that a husband may be justified in beating his wife. Research on men's attitudes and behaviours has found that a large proportion of urban (60 per cent) and rural (62 per cent) men were of the opinion that at times a woman deserves to be beaten (Naved *et al.* 2011). About 52 per cent of men in both the urban and rural sites reported ever physically assaulting female intimate partners, while 10 per cent of urban and 14 per cent of rural men reported ever perpetrating sexual violence against a woman (*Ibid.*).

Such violence against women should also be understood in the context of the use of violence as a culturally specific means of maintaining social hierarchies (Das 2007: 4–5). In organising the landless to challenge such hierarchies, Nijera Kori has necessarily had to

contend with physical violence and abuse, threats of such violence and the filing of false cases perpetrated against its staff and landless group members. The interweaving of class and gender hierarchies has rendered women particularly vulnerable to such violence.

Landless group members and Nijera Kori staff reported that social subordination, rooted in class and gender hierarchies, is being reinforced by the growing influence of socially conservative and politically regressive versions of religious teachings and institutions. Many respondents noted the challenge Nijera Kori faces in counteracting this influence. As a female staff member in Gaibandha emphasised, 'patriarchy makes capitalism stronger and vice versa – they make each other stronger, and you bring in fundamentalism, it makes them both stronger.' A male staff member in Tangail concurred, noting that the progress made by Nijera Kori and others on women's empowerment 'comes as a threat to religious groups and those that support communalism' who, in response, are developing campaigns 'specifically targeted towards women, and teaching them their place to stay within the home.'

### **2.3.4 Political disempowerment of landless communities**

A major focus of Nijera Kori's work has been to enable poor men and women to claim their rights as citizens through challenging elite, and mostly male, control of local power structures. Bangladesh scores very highly on measures of discriminatory social institutions within the Social Institutions and Gender Index, which includes an analysis of restrictions to civil liberties (SIGI 2014). Improving the political representation of landless groups and strengthening women's leadership in local power structures was cited as a priority by landless men and women, and Nijera Kori staff, as one female staff member from Gaibandha emphasised:

*Work towards more local representation in local bodies, schools and at the Upazila level is important... if there were more voices in those committees then the system itself may start to change. Structural change is what we can be working towards.*  
(Nijera Kori female staff member in Gaibandha)

Structural change is needed because of the co-option of local power structures by elite politicians and business men, upheld by relationships of nepotism and connected to national level priorities outside of the interests of local communities (Nijera Kori 2014, supported by focus group discussion with landless groups in both sites). Women from landless communities are especially marginalised when it comes to political voice and visibility, as a Nijera Kori female staff member in Gaibandha emphasised: 'The interests of the poor and women are not there as they are not represented in the system – particularly women, are not represented within the different levels.'

At the village level, the informal councils which settle disputes in the community (the *shalish*) are also dominated by wealthier landowners. A study of shalish rulings in cases of rape concluded that (Siddiqi 2011: 47), 'as exercises in power, shalish encounters in rural Bangladesh rarely involve social equals; they are as much about maintaining class domination as they are about the policing of gender and sexual norms.' In challenging such class and gender domination, Nijera Kori staff and landless group members face many obstacles, not least legal harassment from those controlling the levers of political power, as one men's landless rights group member in Tangail made clear when reporting that 'we have all had cases filed against us after joining the platform, some up to 32 cases. The groups whose interests are affected by this are pressing these cases.'

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 How is the problem being addressed?

#### 3.1.1 “*Being the change we want to see in the world*”

*Nijera Kori staff are integrally connected to people’s lives, through informal conversations, talking to the group members on human terms. [...] When you spend time getting to know people in this way it is about building deep attachments with each other. This has a tremendous impact on the work and the ability to be able to understand and address the issues.*

(Nijera Kori female staff member, Tangail)

Nijera Kori staff are ‘social activists, who must live among and interact closely with the poor whom they try to mobilise’ (Nijera Kori 2014: 9). A total of 399 programme staff (263 are male and 136 female) currently work with over 202,000 landless group members. Programme staff are based in sub-centres located close to the communities with whom they work. The sub-centre is where female and male staff live and work collectively, away from their own families. Staff work for modest salaries and live simply, in order to support the building of close personal, social and political connections to the landless communities with whom they are working (Mukhopadhyay and Dasgupta 2007).

In their collective working and living arrangements, the male and female staff of Nijera Kori seek to practice the values of dignity and equality in gender relations that they espouse with landless group members. Both sub-centres visited by the research team were headed by men, but female and male staff emphasised the participatory, democratic nature of decision-making and egalitarian division of labour, which is also articulated clearly in Nijera Kori’s monitoring and evaluation documentation (Nijera Kori 2014: 8–9). One female staff member in Tangail explained the gendered dimensions of this participatory practice as being that ‘there is always a support system for me within the organisation’. The challenge of developing women’s leadership within the organisation remains however, as Nijera Kori staff are aware (Mukhopadhyay and Dasgupta 2007; Engdahl 2015). A male staff member in Gaibandha was clear that it ‘is not just about increasing staff, but support needs to be given to the staff that are already there – support them to do their work on gender equality effectively and passionately. Creating more women leaders within the organisation is critical.’

Across all of its work, Nijera Kori’s management and decision-making structure is guided by the principles and practices of ‘participatory democracy’ grounded in a commitment to gender equality. These principles guide the group organising practices within the landless constituency, in that autonomous landless organisations are promoted so that the members rely on their own strengths and capabilities. Toward this end, a savings-led approach is integral to Nijera Kori’s group-building strategy, through which landless group members make their own decisions about savings amount and use, and are encouraged to build familiarity with banking systems in order to strengthen their autonomy (Kabeer 2003; Kabeer *et al.* 2010). One of the features which distinguishes Nijera Kori from other organisations is the clear separation between Nijera Kori and the grassroots mobilisation of the landless groups that it supports (Kabeer *et al.* 2010). Landless groups are supported by Nijera Kori staff to develop their own democratic structures at village, *union parishad* and *Upazila* levels, whose representatives meet regularly with Nijera Kori staff at sub-centre and district levels to monitor progress, address concerns and determine priorities.



### **3.1.2 Gender synchronous approach to social mobilisation**

*When we work together with men in Nijera Kori, we vote and discuss the issues and there is little discrimination here. When the men come they may try to speak and take over but this does not happen because the women assert their claim to being able to speak in that space. As an issue comes up, then the groups come together and discuss and then address this issue together.*

(Women's landless rights group member, Tangail)

Within the field of work with men on gender equality there is growing consensus about the importance of 'gender synchronous' programming (Greene and Levack 2010; Fergus 2012; Jewkes *et al.* 2014; Ricardo 2014). This approach 'highlights the value of working with both women and men in synergistic ways which intensify impact', and is perceived as valuable in that it addresses gender dynamics in interaction and relationships between men and women (Flood 2012: 15). Greene and Levack (2010: 12) emphasise that gender synchronous programmes aim to 'view all actors in society in relation to each other, and seek to identify or create shared values among women and men, [...] values that promote human rights, mutual support for health, non-violence, equality, and gender justice'. The importance of a more gender synchronous approach to women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh has been highlighted in research by Ahmed (2008), who found that the exclusion of men from women-targeted microcredit programmes can exacerbate gender-based violence and prevent joint decision-making within the home. The study identified the need to empower men who expressed gender-equitable attitudes and relationships as change agents to reach other men in the community and to change community norms related to gender.

Nijera Kori has founded its social mobilisation of landless communities on such a gender synchronous approach. At the village level, following a period of relationship building and community assessment, Nijera Kori programme staff support the formation of landless women's and men's groups. Both female and male respondents, from landless communities and Nijera Kori, attested to the importance of having these separate spaces for women and men as the foundation for more effective collaboration between women and men on addressing issues of shared concern. Within the women's groups, Nijera Kori female staff support the landless group members to overcome their internalisation of patriarchal subordination, while within the men's groups, male staff work with the men to become better allies to women in their struggles for gender equality. Men's and women's groups come together regularly to support reflection, learning and action to address gender inequality, build key communication skills, enable trust, and establish egalitarian relationships across personal and political spheres. At the heart of this approach is the organisation's commitment to gender synchronous programming:

Nijera Kori believes that male/female relations need not be inherently antagonistic and that men can become women's allies in the struggle against patriarchal oppression. Without active support and participation of the men from their families and communities, women from landless households would find their struggle for respect and recognition far more difficult.  
(Nijera Kori 2014: 9).

Nijera Kori's recognition of the need to engage the active support and participation of landless men in landless women's struggles for economic rights is borne out by research on NGO strategies for empowerment in Bangladesh, which found that the support of male family members opened up pathways of empowerment for women, including greater public mobility and participation in politics (Kabeer *et al.* 2011). A female staff member in the Tangail sub-centre emphasised the work they do to change landless men's attitudes on women's rights:

*We need to be able to empower women to come into the economic arena. So we need to work with men, in order to change their attitudes. There are many strategies. One of these might be working within the home and asking men how they would feel if their*

wife or daughter was marginalised in different ways. Starting with attitude change in men is so important because without this then women will not truly be free.  
(Nijera Kori female staff member, Tangail)

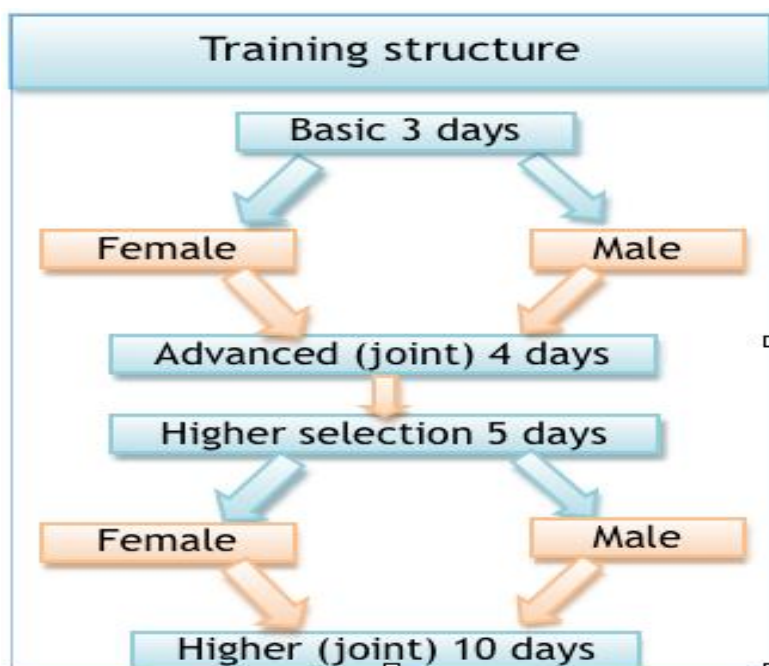
Once again, Nijera Kori’s commitment to democratic process underpins this gender synchronous approach. Separate spaces for women and men allow for women to gain the self-confidence to participate as equals with men. Dialogue between the women’s and men’s groups is continual, not least within Nijera Kori’s training curriculum as well as within the movement’s democratic structures, including all major decision-making committees to set priorities and strategies for collective action and the implementation of those actions. Accountability to the principles of participatory democracy and gender equality is also key. As a Nijera Kori male staff member in Tangail commented: ‘They follow a very democratic process within the groups and everyone should have equal space, and the men cannot raise their voice, until she has finished speaking. There is accountability.’

### 3.1.3 Intersectional consciousness-raising for collective action

Respondents from both the landless groups and Nijera Kori staff agreed that the success of this gender synchronous approach to social mobilisation rests on Nijera Kori’s structured programme of training workshops and consciousness raising discussions, which are influenced by a Frierean pedagogy and grounded in the specifics of the local context (Friere 1973). In addition to ongoing personal reflection and political education in their women’s and men’s groups, landless group members progress through a tiered structure of training, from basic rights awareness to leadership development to strategic planning for collective action, in both gender-separate and gender-mixed workshops.

*The first basic training is for women and men separately – they are new to the group, they need to feel comfortable to be able to speak out and not watch their words because men are present. People relate their stories to each other, moving away from “this is what I have been born into and that is my fate”, to analysing societal systems and structures that create this system. For women what often comes out is the issue of insecurity in their movement and mobility, but more deeply their security over their life choices.*  
(Nijera Kori Founder, Dhaka)

Figure 3.1 Nijera Kori’s structured training programme



Over time, and partly in response to the findings of a Gender Impact Assessment evaluation commissioned by the organisation (Mukhopadhyay and Dasgupta 2007), Nijera Kori has developed additional training programmes on violence against women, reproductive health and rights, and gender equality in relation to political economy, human rights and constitutional commitments (Nijera Kori 2014). Such training has given landless group members, and staff themselves, an ability to understand the structural nature of the injustices that they face and a framework of social justice, grounded in the principles of socialism, nationalism, secularism and democracy which informed the founding constitution of Bangladesh, within which to take action against such injustice.

For women, much of the emphasis is on their leadership capacity and confidence. As a Nijera Kori female staff member in Gaibandha urged:

*Women have been forced to lag behind, so if women don't come forward then we can't make long lasting changes happen. We can't do it simply by working with men. Women have to come out and take up leadership positions. We do a lot of work on women's leadership skills. We give a lot of examples of women leaders, we talk about the problems they will face when they take up these roles, and how to overcome them.*  
(Nijera Kori female staff member, Gaibandha)

Working with female landless rights group members to understand the ways in which class and gender hierarchies operate together to force women to lag behind is a critical component of their leadership development. This intersectional analysis is also used in consciousness raising work with men, to deepen their understanding of the ways in which their class subordination is bound up with patriarchy. Some of the work with men is concerned with making the links between their experience of class injustice and their perpetration of gender injustice, as a male staff member in Tangail explained: 'In terms of oppressions, what they experience in terms of class is the same as how they oppress women in their society – in all of their programs and activities this is how we engage the men on the issues.' Men are also supported to reflect on the costs, to them and to the women in their lives, of equating their masculinity with being the breadwinner in a context of rising male unemployment.

The consciousness raising activities outlined above are not only empowering in and of themselves. Crucially, they are directed toward equipping landless communities with the skills and confidence to take direct action to improve the material circumstances of their lives. Priorities for action are deliberated and set by landless groups themselves, and supported through dialogue with Nijera Kori local program staff that have close, ongoing relationships with the groups. Such action takes many forms – from legal writs, to sit-ins at the offices of local administration and the *thana*, to the monitoring of land allocations and financial disbursements to the poor, to participating in community justice mechanisms (the *shalish*). Landless group members and Nijera Kori staff felt that the success of such action owes much to the unity among men's and women's landless groups forged by the consciousness-raising programme, as well as to the sheer numbers that can be mobilised. Several female respondents commented, significantly, that it was only in the course of working together that they came to trust men's commitment to gender equality as part of the collective struggle for economic justice for landless communities.

## **3.2 What has changed?**

### **3.2.1 Strengthened resources, agency and capabilities**

Nijera Kori works with landless communities to strengthen their collective capabilities to change the conditions of economic, social and political disempowerment that they face. Strengthened capabilities are the result of both having greater resources, as the pre-conditions for making real choices, and having a greater sense of agency in the making of such choices (Sen 1999). Both female and male respondents were clear that Nijera Kori's

work has strengthened the agency of its landless group members. A man from a landless rights group in Tangail stressed that:

*Now that we are in the group we don't bow down, although there is a lot of abuse against us. [...] We come to this group and we respond to this and try to clear our frustrations by reacting to the oppression together.*  
(Men's landless rights group member, Tangail)

Many respondents commented on the particular changes in women's lives. Improvements in women's mobility and economic choices were noted by many. A male staff member in Gaibandha observed that 'more women have come out of the home and into the workplace, and into the bazaars; they are physically coming out of the home, setting up their own shops and accessing employment.' Respondents were also clear that this enhanced sense of agency is the result of the collective strength and solidarity that landless people, and in particular landless women, gain from participating in the landless rights groups organised and supported by Nijera Kori. As a female landless rights group member in Tangail emphasised: 'I would rather be with the group, than be alone. There may be just ten people on that side opposing us, but there are 100 people on our side, the side of truth.' Other research in Bangladesh has attested to the importance of this group solidarity and collective action, for strengthening women's agency (Kabeer and Huq 2010; Kabeer 2012).

Crucially, however, in the case of Nijera Kori, this collective agency is underpinned by the strengthening of collective resources. Even though Nijera Kori will not provide microcredit services, on the basis that they can lead to dependency on credit providers, research has found that its group savings programme has important economic impacts, in terms of increased economic activity and landholdings when compared with more conventional microcredit NGOs: '[Nijera Kori group members] are generally more aware of their rights than most poor people, more willing to bargain for higher wages or a fairer price for their labour and products, [and] more able to access the services of government extension services' (Kabeer *et al.* 2010: 11).

One clear indication of landless group members' strengthened capabilities is their increased voice and visibility within established power structures. Respondents in both research sites noted the success that has been achieved in electing landless group members, and especially women, as representatives within local administrative structures. As a female staff member in Tangail said: 'We have noticed change at the political level in different local government bodies, as women are participating in political programs like processions and demonstrations and also local government elections.' A respondent at the Tangail stakeholder meeting noted a singular success, when a long-standing female landless rights group member won an open seat (i.e. not reserved for women) in a local government election. This success is reflected nationwide. Nijera Kori's most recent annual report outlines that 'a total of 267 landless women members were newly nominated for Union Parishad (council) standing committees, whereas previously there were no female landless members on the committee' (Nijera Kori 2014: 21).

### **3.2.2 Shifting collective norms on violence against women**

In both sites violence against women, in its multiple forms, continues to be an important priority for Nijera Kori staff and landless rights group members. There was broad agreement among both female and male respondents that significant progress has been made.

*There will always be challenges and resistance, but within the landless groups, violence against women has come down. People didn't speak about the issue of domestic violence before, but now people are speaking about it more, and so it might be that it seems like violence levels are going up, but this may be due to reporting levels increasing.*  
(Nijera Kori female staff member, Tangail)

In both research sites it was reported that collective agreements within the landless communities organised by Nijera Kori have reduced the incidence of dowry and early marriage. A male landless rights group member in Tangail reported that 'there is a practice of marrying children to each other without dowry in order to model this practice to others in the community – often where daughters are married outside of the group they insist on dowry.' A female landless rights group member in Tangail concurred:

*Dowry is perceived to have reduced. But there is a qualitative difference within the group and outside of the group. There is no provision for dowry within the group, and there is a perception that the provision of dowry outside of the group has come down by half. In the villages, and also in the group, there is no more child marriage happening.*

This phenomenon of collective agreements on dowry and early marriage suggests a degree of normative change within the landless groups, which is extending into the wider community. Further indications of such normative change can be drawn from respondents' perceptions on generational change, with younger people within landless communities growing up in a more gender equitable environment. A female staff member in Tangail noted that 'changes have happened amongst the younger generation, issues like child birth, marriage, education.' Inspired by his parents' participation in landless rights groups, a young man in Gaibandha reported that he had initiated a youth group of 30 people and a savings group to support this.

Respondents identified several factors as being key to this normative change on violence against women. The first was the consciousness raising Nijera Kori has done with women to raise awareness of their rights and entitlements, and the claiming of these. Secondly, consciousness raising work with men is helping to change their attitudes toward their own and other men's violence against women. A Nijera Kori male staff member in Gaibandha emphasised that 'there has been some progress – the men have been very active on violence against women. They know this is wrong. There is a zero tolerance policy on child marriage, physical forms of violence, and inclusion in decision-making and working outside.'

Discussion with male landless rights group members in Tangail made clear that participation in such groups has helped men to deal differently with their economic frustrations, which used to result in violence against their wives. A further indication of the effectiveness of Nijera Kori's work with men is evident from the organisation's report (Nijera Kori 2014: 19) that of 699 successful mobilisation activities – often responding to individual cases – undertaken by landless groups in the 2013–2014 reporting period, '283 movements were initially started by male landless groups. Due to these movements 109 child marriages, 238 dowry issues, 52 divorces, 62 polygamy issues and 198 case of domestic violence were stopped.'

A third significant factor relates to the progress that has been made in reforming the elite, male-dominated *shalish*. Nationwide, the organisation reports that a total of 28,427 landless members played an active role in monitoring 1,757 *shalishes* by acting as observers in the 2013–2014 reporting period. 'As a result, the landless members observed and made collective queries about the manipulation and control of the shalish system by the powerful groups. The landless group members pressurised the local shalishes to ensure justice' (Nijera Kori 2014: 13). This progress was reflected in both the Gaibandha and Tangail research sites:

*Previously it was the elites who were in charge, the landless groups would bring the tables, water, hookah etc but would not be a part of this function. Now landless members are being included in the shalish themselves, both men and women, but importantly women who were previously absent. Especially where Nijera Kori groups are working. Not only to deal with 'women's issues', for example violence against*

women, but on all issues that are relevant to the shalish and they are incorporated as judges and so on.

(Nijera Kori male staff member, Tangail)

### **3.2.3 Realisation of economic rights**

Securing landless people's access to and use of *khas* land and water bodies remains a central focus of Nijera Kori's work, where some significant progress has been made in the research sites visited, not least with respect to women's rights over such land. As a female staff member in Gaibandha made clear: 'Establishing women's rights over the *khas* land that has been acquired, and ensuring the women are able to farm the land has been important, because it is not enough to claim the *khas* land to establish women's rights.' Nationwide, the most recent Nijera Kori Annual Report (2014: 23) notes that: 'In the reporting period, [...] 457 women gained access to Khasland and water bodies. Among these, 211 are single women.'

Working with men to support women's claims over *khas* land has been an important focus of the work in both research sites. As a Nijera Kori male staff member in Gaibandha reported:

*Access to khas land – not just this, but also access to natural resources, agricultural workers, relationship with the land, the distribution is very unequal. So we are trying to make this more equal. Men and women have equal rights, but men exert their right over the land, and over property rights the land always goes to the men, as there is no documentation. Sons will also take the land and so inheritance is also an issue.*

(Nijera Kori male staff member, Gaibandha)

Work with male landless rights group members is also addressing the problem of men's resistance to sharing the burden of domestic tasks and household decision-making with their wives. Nijera Kori's annual report notes marked improvements in men's sharing of domestic work and family decision-making through mutual discussion (Nijera Kori 2014). It was noted by both female and male respondents that some progress had been made in this regard, though it was acknowledged that much more work was still required, particularly with respect to sharing economic decisions. A female staff member in Tangail said that there is 'change at the family level in women's decision making, they are participating more, and women are able to speak about the issues that are affecting them and their families.' A male staff member in Gaibandha agreed, noting that 'men are doing women's work, and taking up chores that are performed by women, and in some cases those men face a lot of criticism outside of the home, but they reject this and would rather speak proudly in the groups'. Staff members and landless group members agreed that the experience of being supported by other men in their groups has helped men to deal with the social stigma that they have faced in taking on what is traditionally seen as women's work.

## **3.3 What can we learn?**

### **3.3.1 Collective struggle changes personal lives**

**Individual group members' sense of personal agency is fostered through processes of shared action by, and mutual support within, the group; individual empowerment is linked with collective struggle.** Nijera Kori's group organising strategy with men and women is central to its empowerment work with landless communities. A female staff member in Gaibandha said: 'Unity is power and strength. If the oppressed are organised they can do a lot more, if they are alone they cannot do all of these things. Together another world is possible.'

Respondents agreed that the power of being and acting together in a group has had a particular impact on landless women's sense of agency in their lives. The coordinator of Nijera Kori emphasised that 'the women, when they are together, feel the need to be stronger and more assertive'. The significance of this group experience for personal transformation has been observed in research on other social mobilisation initiatives with

poor women in Bangladesh (Kabeer and Huq 2010). It is also through the process of group-based learning, reflection and the establishment of shared agreements that the attitudes and practices of men and women towards gender equality in their personal lives are changing.

Furthermore, through the pooling of resources, and collective decision-making over their use, the groups strengthen the economic resilience of their members. In addition, the process of acting collectively to improve the material circumstances of their lives fosters a sense of personal agency that has clear economic benefits. Significantly, such collective struggle plays an important psychological role in sustaining a sense that change is possible, in conditions of profound inequalities around resources and power and deeply entrenched social hierarchies. A male staff member in Gaibandha made this point clearly:

*Even though people have sort of lost hope in how the structures and system is, the political party might change, but the system is the same. But when they see examples of people getting together and fighting local government and the elite then there is hope.*  
(Nijera Kori male staff member, Gaibandha)

### **3.3.2 Strengthening solidarity is key to gender transformation**

**Key to this link between collective struggle and personal transformation is the experience of solidarity between women and men fostered by Nijera's Kori's gender synchronous approach to group-based social mobilisation.** As a women's landless rights group member in Gaibandha said, 'on the issue of fair wages it is important that men and women come together. The fight is not as strong without women or without men, a bicycle cannot ride on one wheel.' Kabeer's (2003: 20) research found that the 'effectiveness of the process of building group solidarity is evident from the co-operative nature of the relationships both between group members and between group members and Nijera Kori staff, which contrasted sharply with more hierarchical relationships which existed between group members and staff of credit-based NGOs', citing reviews by Mahmud (1999) and Thornton (2000). Through organising separate groups for women and men from landless communities, and fostering democratic processes of decision-making and collaboration within and between these female and male groups, Nijera Kori's gender synchronous approach to social mobilisation has nurtured the solidarity on which the linked struggles for gender justice and economic justice depend.

**Such gender solidarity rests on an intersectional understanding of women's and men's shared class experience of economic oppression, shaped as it is differently for women and men by patriarchy.** Respondents were clear that the basis of women's solidarity was their shared experience of the interconnections between gender and class hierarchies. A women's landless rights group member in Tangail contrasted the oppression they face as working class women with the experiences of women from the landowning class: 'Upper class women, when they go to bazaar no-one really turns, but for us, we are disrespected, they talk about our characters and dismiss us, it is the same when we want to send our children to school'. But Nijera Kori also uses an intersectional analysis of the links between patriarchal hierarchies and the economic exploitation suffered by landless communities to help landless men see that their struggles alongside women in their communities against economic exploitation cannot ever be won unless they are also a struggle against the patriarchal exploitation with which it is enmeshed.

**The role that men's solidarity with women's struggles plays has also been cited as contributing significantly to their success.** As a female landless rights group member in Tangail said, 'Nijera Kori's approach is very effective, you need both hands to do something. Man and woman can be an integral part of something.' In its work with men's groups and in settings where women and men within landless communities are working together, Nijera Kori places a lot of emphasis on the need for, and skills in, men being allies to women in fighting gender injustice. The indivisibility of rights, and the interdependence of social and gender justice, is also stressed, as a male Nijera Kori staff member in Gaibandha outlined:

'Since I believe in equal rights, I must support women's rights. It is much better if a couple share decisions equally.' The focus in terms of working with men on their practices of solidarity and allyship with women is also emphasised in terms of supporting women's voice and agency at the household level. As a female staff member in Tangail noted:

*In terms of men's attitudes, we conduct the weekly meetings with the men, we put a lot of emphasis on the work at the family level and personal level. With regards to the internalisation, if we want to send a woman to a training, and she is not sure, then we talk to the husband, and support him to understand the value so she can be inspired to go.*  
(Nijera Kori female staff member, Tangail)

Nijera Kori's focus on men's roles as allies to women in their struggles for gender equality is reflected in findings from qualitative research in Bangladesh, which highlights the importance of the support of men within family life for women's greater participation in public and political domains (Kabeer *et al.* 2011).

**Another, less noted but still important aspect of group solidarity is the solidarity among men that Nijera Kori has been able to forge in support of more positive, gender equitable expressions of masculinity.** The language of masculinity and men's gender identity was often not explicitly used by both Nijera Kori staff and landless group members to talk about the work that was done with men. It was clear, however, that consciousness raising work with men has been concerned with drawing attention to the patriarchal dimension of the class oppression that they experience at the hands of elite men and how this oppresses men as well as women. In response to this, the groups for landless men have become a source of mutual support and collective strength for addressing women's rights issues, and also an alternative peer group which helps them deal with backlash from other men in the community who reject their support for gender equality.

**3.3.3 No gender justice without personal and institutional accountability**  
**Holding political and economic elites to account has been central to Nijera Kori's social mobilisation for landless communities' rights from the beginning.** Pressure from 'below' is key to good governance, as Nijera Kori's founder emphasises:

*The donor funding through NGOs, the wastage, is there. It is only when you have the accountability from the ground that you are going to be able to ensure that your funds are going to be able to achieve the goals.*  
(Nijera Kori Founder, Dhaka)

Some of the ways in which this pressure is exercised include protest marches and the physical claiming of political space through encircling government buildings, in order to demand a response from officials. For example, in demanding action on cases of sexual violence which have been neglected by the police and courts, which was reported by both men's and women's groups. Landless groups also perform a watchdog function, in which 'landless members independently gather information about the government's social service and they develop a relationship with them based on accountability' (Nijera Kori 2014: 15). Such monitoring of women's access to government social protection schemes, and the implementation of laws and policies affecting landless people's rights are priorities for the men's and women's groups.

Crucially, these practices of accountability are also directed toward individuals as well as institutions, insisting that personal and social justice are inseparably connected. In particular, the progress made towards gender justice has in part rested on a firm commitment to holding men accountable for their patriarchal behaviour, whether among elite male landowners or male landless group members. The reforms that Nijera Kori has helped bring about in the operation of the *shalish*, discussed earlier, are an important part of this.



## 4 Conclusions

Important lessons for working with men on women's economic empowerment can be drawn from Nijera Kori's long experience of social mobilisation with landless communities in support of linked struggles for gender and economic justice.

**Separate spaces for women and men can provide a gender sensitive foundation to build awareness and understanding of gender equality and women's rights,** consciousness raising of gendered oppression, and democratic leadership skills. In turn this enables more effective collaboration between women and men on identifying and addressing issues of women's rights as a shared concern when planning and implementing strategies for change.

**The establishment of participatory, democratic decision-making structures across the movement and egalitarian division of labour between men and women** also provides an important platform for the recognition and enhancement of women's leadership.

**Work with men to challenge the patriarchal subordination of women must span the spectrum of patriarchy's influence on women's lives within private and public domains.** This spans from deeply internalised misogyny to institutional subjugation. Hence Nijera Kori's emphasis on a group organising strategy, whose forging of intra- and inter-gender solidarities becomes the basis for changing both personal actions as well as decision-making institutions.

**Forging solidarity between women and men in the struggle for gender justice has rested on building an intersectional understanding of the ways in which class oppression and gender oppression operate together to constrain the lives of not only women but also men in landless communities.** The work aimed to build men's consciousness of the impact of patriarchy in terms of elite men and the institutions they control, and their own and women's lives. The struggle for the rights and dignity of women within their communities therefore can become an integral part of landless men's struggle for their own rights and dignity.

**Gender synchronous programming must be built not only on a shared consciousness of gender justice issues but shared action by both women and men** to address these issues together at both the household, community and institutional level. The process of collective struggle, in which women and men come together to take action to change the material circumstances of their lives and uphold their rights is crucial in terms of strengthening trusting relationships and accountability on which progress toward gender equality depends.

**Nijera Kori's experience also highlights the utility of grounding work with men in women's rights and gender equality within a community's struggle for economic justice and advancement,** not least because a powerful way initially to engage men in the former was to emphasise its benefits for the latter. Many respondents used the metaphor of the bicycle to describe the importance of greater gender equality between landless women and men (the two 'wheels') in the household for the economic progress of the whole community.

**Nijera Kori's long-term mobilisation approach suggests the importance of supporting programmes that place a priority on the strength and depth of relationships they have or can build with communities** which they are serving, especially when it comes to trying to change entrenched patriarchal norms and structures. The fact that Nijera Kori has worked for three decades or more in many communities is significant in terms of the credibility it has established as a result of the duration of these relationships. Respondents, including the

stakeholder groups interviewed in both research sites, were clear that this sustained engagement has proved critical in mobilising landless communities, who over the years have grown wary of short-term NGO interventions.

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# Annex 1 Research instrument focus areas

## The problem

- What are the issues being worked on by Nijera Kori? In what ways do men and women experience these issues differently?
- What are the most significant changes you have seen in these issues over the last 10 years?
- How do these changes relate to women's empowerment?
- What does the ordinary man feel about these changes in women's empowerment?
- In what ways do patriarchal practices, norms and policies continue to constrain the lives of the women Nijera Kori works with?
- In terms of the men with whom Nijera Kori works, in what ways are they upholding these patriarchal practices, norms and policies and in what ways are they challenging them?
- How do interactions between poor men and elite men affect the former's relationships to, and experiences of, patriarchal practices, norms and policies?

## Strategies

- What strategies have you applied so far?
- How have the strategies changed over time to affect these changing problems?
- How do you work with the men's groups to address issues of gender inequality?
- How do you work within the men's groups to ensure that this space is more equal and democratic, so that they don't reproduce the inequalities?
- How have you supported the men's groups and the women's groups to work together?
- When there have been challenges, how have you overcome these?
- How do you support women to feel powerful in the space with men and raise their voice?
- Tell us about the different levels of consciousness raising and the work that you do with women to support them to understand and claim their rights?
- How do you work with men to ensure that they don't just have the knowledge of women's rights, but that they internalise this, and are committed to these values?
- To what extent do partnerships with other organisations, or actors, support your work, and how?

## Change

- What have been your biggest successes in the campaigns that you are involved in?
- In what ways have you helped to improve the lives of the women with whom you work?
- In terms of the impact of your work on gender equality and women's empowerment, how effective has Nijera Kori been in changing men's attitudes and behaviours in support of such equality and empowerment?

## Lessons learned

- Based on what you have learned from your experience, how would you like to see the work of Nijera Kori change in the coming years to make it more effective?

## Annex 2 Story of change

Consciousness-raising and collective struggles have enabled the landless women of Mechaat Sapla Saluk cluster village in Shaghatta *thana* to unearth the many layers of injustices in their lives. In the beginning of the landless organisation, the women had thought that once they fought alongside the men to establish their collective rights over the 25.63 acres of *khas* land, their struggle would be over. They had thought that, they, too, would get to reap the benefits of the land for which they had battled endlessly – organising countless meetings, sit-ins, processions and press conferences, submitting memorandums to local government representatives, and even engaging in physical confrontations with armed land grabbers. One of their own, 40-year-old Kachmaati Bibi, a landless leader and mother of three, lost her life during one such clash and became a symbol of resistance for the landless.

In the protracted movement against land grabbers, the landless women emerged as a formidable force, both to outsiders as well as to the men in their own groups. In the process of collective struggle, women began to seek answers, challenge conventional structures and demand what was rightfully theirs. The male members, too, began to acknowledge and respect the contribution of women, admitting that the latter were instrumental in the fight against the influential land grabbers and an apathetic state mechanism.

And yet, once the landless took back the *khas* land from the illegal occupiers, women realised that their fight was far from over – that some of the very men who had fought alongside them were now unwilling to grant them equal access to the land.

Through the group discussions, women learnt that according to the Khasland Distribution Policy 1987, men and women have equal entitlement to the *khas* land. But in reality, a woman never received her share of the distributed land once a married couple got separated or divorced, or if her husband got remarried; the man made sure he retained claims over the land, even though, legally, the land belonged to both the husband and the wife. When a woman lost her husband, the land passed down to the nearest male member of the family, leaving her destitute. The landless women also came to recognise (and protest against) a highly discriminatory aspect of the 1987 policy – that a single woman without a son is not eligible for *khas* land.

“But can’t we get the land?” asks an outraged landless leader, “If the ability to work on agricultural land is a requirement for application, how are we ineligible? Don’t we work on the land? Haven’t we proved our worth as farmers?”

Women’s unequal access to *khas* land has become a special focus of Nijera Kori’s work, as the organisation now understands better that class-based struggles alone cannot bring about gender equality. It stresses the need to work with both men and women to instil egalitarian values and practices in their families, groups and communities as they wage larger movements for economic justice.



Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality' (EMERGE) is a two-year project to build an openly accessible basis of evidence, lessons and guidance for working with boys and men to promote gender equality, by early 2016. Supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Leadership for Change Programme, a consortium of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice Network collaborates in reviewing and analysing existing evidence, in documenting lessons from the field and in developing guidance for improved learning, policy and practice.

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