

# We do it ourselves: Nijera Kori and the struggle for economic and gender justice in Bangladesh

## Key messages

- > Nijera Kori is a national social movement organising landless people to claim their rights through social mobilisation.
- > Nijera Kori works with landless men's and women's groups through consciousness raising to better understand the intersections between gender and class oppression. As a result, men have become activists in the shared struggle for gender justice, rights and dignity.
- > Synchronising work with men and women for gender equality has supported group learning and reflection strategies that address gender dynamics in interpersonal relationships and catalyse collective action to challenge unfair norms and institutional practices.
- > The establishment of democratic decision making structures across the movement and the egalitarian division of labour between men and women also provides an important platform for the recognition and enhancement of women's leadership.
- > Through the pooling of resources, and collective decision making over their use, women and men's groups strengthen the economic resilience of their members.



Women's landless rights group members mobilising to raise awareness of their rights.

Image from Nijera Kori

## Introduction

Nijera Kori is working in Bangladesh, a country where there has been progress on gender equality indicators (in health, education and labour force participation) but where there is significant socioeconomic inequality. Land ownership is central to livelihoods, as the majority of people live in rural areas and many are reliant on agriculture. Without land, people's social and political influence is constrained.

Nijera Kori organises landless people into groups to secure access to land set aside for their use in government land reform policy. This includes state

owned land which is often located in marginal areas on coasts and rivers (*khas* land). Nijera Kori has 202,007 members and over half are women. Landless women face more obstacles than men in accessing land. For example, households headed by women without a boy child are excluded in national policy from accessing *khas* land. This 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 families, groups and communities as they build larger movements for economic justice.

As more women are employed outside the home, Nijera Kori's work has expanded to include struggles over wages. In Bangladesh, women earn on average 65 percent of men's wages and there is occupational sex segregation. A high proportion of women are employed in agriculture – mainly as unpaid family labour – a sector in which there is no legally enforced minimum wage. Nijera Kori also supports landless communities in claiming entitlements to state safety net measures. Its work has led to improvements in the following areas.

**Women's mobility and economic choices:** Nijera Kori has had important collective economic impacts, in terms of higher rates of economic activity and landholdings when compared with more conventional microcredit NGOs. A study by Kabeer et al. (2010:11) noted that Nijera Kori 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'.

**Engagement in formal politics:** The work of Nijera Kori has led to the election of landless group members, especially women, as representatives within local administrative structures. Its most recent annual report notes that 267 landless women members were newly nominated for Union Parishad (council) standing committees, whereas previously there were no female landless members.

**Changing social norms:** Work by the landless people's groups has reduced the incidence of dowry and early marriage. It has also addressed men's resistance to sharing the burden of domestic tasks and household decision making with their wives, which they believe has led to more sharing of domestic work.

## How were men and boys engaged in the intervention to successfully promote gender equality aims?

Nijera Kori uses a 'gender synchronous' approach, where men and women are seen in relation to each other. Landless people are supported to situate gender equality within the communities' struggle for economic justice and advancement. Men's and

“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

women's groups are formed as a foundation for addressing issues collectively. The groups come together regularly to build communication skills and trust, and to establish egalitarian relationships that are both personal and political.

Within the women's groups, Nijera Kori female staff support the landless group members to overcome their internalisation of patriarchal subordination. Within the men's groups, male staff support the men to become better allies to women in their struggles for gender equality. Linking gender to other intersecting issues of social injustice helps men to build a personal and political connection to how and why gender inequality should be addressed in their lives. The struggle for the rights and dignity of women within their communities can become an integral part of landless men's own struggle, as the groups come together to form shared values that promote human rights, mutual support, non-violence, equality, and gender justice.

“I would rather be with the group, than to be alone. There may be just 10 people on that side opposing us, but there are 100 people on our side, the side of truth.”

FEMALE LANDLESS RIGHTS GROUP MEMBER, TANGAIL

## What processes and strategies were used?

### Consciousness raising for collective action

Nijera Kori supports ongoing personal reflection in the women's and men's groups. The approach is underpinned by a belief that men should be held accountable for their patriarchal behaviour, whether they are elite male landowners or male landless



Men and women from landless rights groups making shared decisions on community based action. Image from Nijera Kori

group members. Men who express gender equitable attitudes are supported and empowered so that they can reach out to other men in the community to change norms.

### Training

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 mixed workshops. Additional training covers topics like violence against women, reproductive health and rights, and gender equality in relation to political economy, human rights and constitutional commitments. This helps to situate the issues faced by group members in a broader national and global context.

### Social mobilisation and policy watchdog role

Social mobilisation within the landless groups takes many forms – from legal writs, to sit-ins at the offices of local administration, to the monitoring of land allocations and financial disbursements to the poor, to participating in community justice mechanisms (the shalish). Landless groups also perform a watchdog function, in which they gather information about the government’s social services – women’s access to specific schemes is a priority.

### Economic empowerment and justice

Nijera Kori does not provide microcredit services as it believes this approach can lead to dependency on credit providers. It promotes the fostering of autonomy through a group savings programme which has an

“ 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 as there is no documentation. Sons will also take the land and so inheritance is also an issue. ”

NIJERA KORI MALE STAFF MEMBER, GAIBANDHA

impact on economic activity and landholdings. Nijera Kori also works with men in landless groups to challenge patriarchal practices that retain male control of land.

### Lessons learnt

- Men’s engagement in women’s rights and gender equality can be usefully catalysed within a community’s struggle for economic justice and advancement.
- Separate consciousness raising and decision making spaces for women and men build understanding of, and action on, gendered oppression and economic injustice. They enable more effective collaboration between women and men in identifying and addressing issues of women’s rights as a shared concern.

- Making links between inequality in the personal and public sphere enables group members to challenge the subordination of women in their own communities and in institutions of power (such as the *shalish*).
- Forging solidarity between women and men in the struggle for gender justice rests on building a shared political consciousness of the ways in which class and gender oppression operate together to constrain the lives of not only women but also men in landless communities.
- 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 and dignity, is crucial in terms of strengthening the relationships of trust and accountability on which progress toward gender equality depends.
- Participatory, democratic and egalitarian decision making structures and division of labour across the movement provides an important platform for the recognition and enhancement of women's leadership.

### Further reading

Edström, J.; Hassink, A.; Shahrokh, T. and Stern, E. (eds) (2015) *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

Greig, A. Shahrokh, T., Preetha, S. (2015) 'We do it ourselves: Nijera Kori and the struggle for economic and gender justice in Bangladesh', *EMERGE Case Study 2*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

Kabeer, N. (2003) *Making rights work for the poor: Nijera Kori and the construction of "collective capabilities" in rural Bangladesh*, IDS Working Paper 200, Brighton: IDS

Kabeer, N., S. Mahmud and J. G. I. Castro (2010) *NGOs' Strategies and the Challenge of Development and Democracy in Bangladesh*, IDS Working Paper 343, Brighton: IDS

### Methodology

This Story of Change is based on the EMERGE case study:

Greig, A. Shahrokh, T., Preetha, S. (2015) 'We do it ourselves: Nijera Kori and the struggle for economic and gender justice in Bangladesh', *EMERGE Case Study 2*.

Qualitative research was undertaken in districts in north-central and northwest Bangladesh. Focus group discussions were held with staff members of Nijera Kori, landless members of the movement (both men and women) and other key stakeholders, including civil society members, journalists, academics and local government representatives. One-on-one interviews were conducted with staff members of Nijera Kori for a more comprehensive understanding of their activities. Meetings were held with three key informant stakeholders, two researcher/activists and the founder of Nijera Kori, at the national level.

This story of change is part of a series of eight, developed collaboratively by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice as part of the Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality (EMERGE) project. The project is made possible through support from DFID under the Leadership for Change programme. Learn more about EMERGE – our work, our findings and free resources, here: <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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