

Bulding Capabilities for gender equality: Gender Impact Assessment of Nijera Kori

**Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay
Jashodhara Dasgupta**

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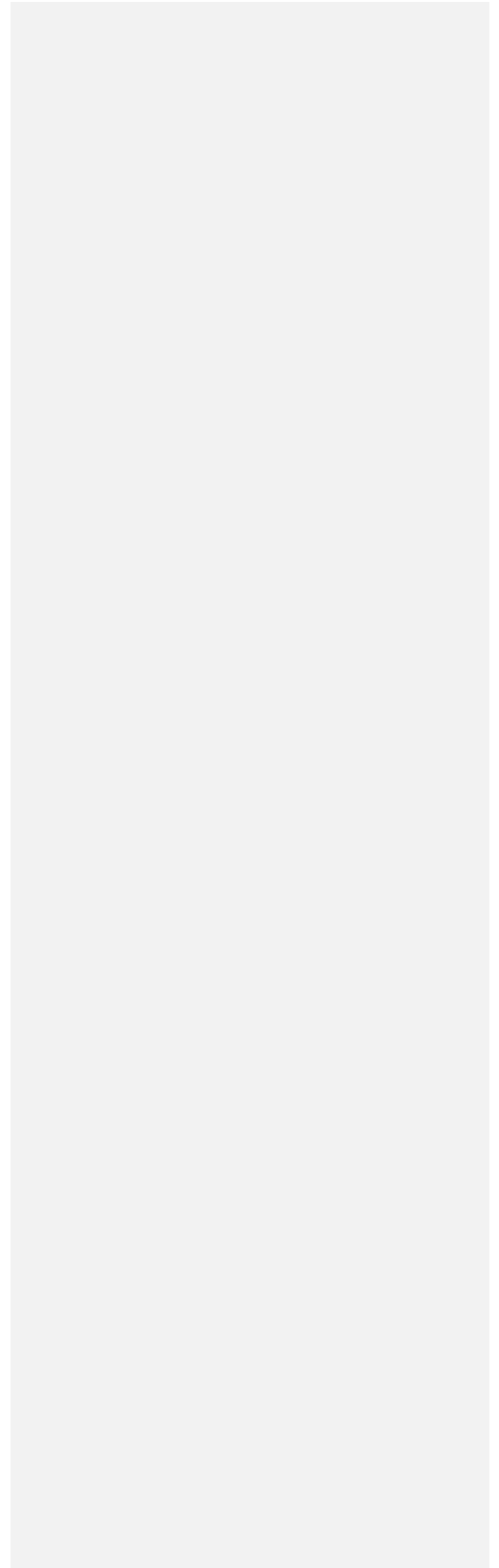


Table of Contents

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Chapter One | Background and Methodology Background Method Framework of gender assessment |
| Chapter Two | Changes in gender relations among landless groups A. Reasons for change B. Realms of change C. Gaps perceived D. Discussion |
| Chapter Three | Institutional interventions and gender relations within the organization A. Leadership profile B. Institutional mechanisms C. Staff Capacity Building D. Organizational culture |
| CHAPTER Four: | Gender Relations analysis in Nijera Kori A. Revisiting the Collective Capability building agenda B. The impasse C. Aspirations and alternative visions D. Why the impasse? |
| CHAPTER FIVE: | Recommendations |

Annexes

1. References
2. Schedule of Consultants
3. Interview Guide with Staff and FGD Guide with landless groups

Chapter One: Background and Methodology

Background

Nijera Kori (NK) is a unique organization in Bangladesh working for over two decades on the issues affecting landless people in rural areas through organization, capacity building and mobilization for rights claiming. It is unique in that it has differed from other large NGOs in Bangladesh who have largely gone into service provision or into micro-credit in line with donor expectations. NK has remained unwaveringly committed to consciousness-raising as the main mode of working with landless communities and enabled them to effectively wage struggles for their entitlements.

Although NK is headed by a woman and had initially started work with landless women, it also includes large numbers of men, both in senior staff positions and as group members and leaders. Women's issues have often been the cause of many struggles, and women's empowerment has been a goal of most interventions. However there is a certain observed dichotomy that has been pointed out by earlier reviewers, in that there are very few women staff at most levels to a ratio of 1:4.

In this context, NK wished to understand how far it has really been able to bring about gender equality, both within the organization and within the communities where it works. NK hopes to build an understanding of the obstacles to qualitative changes towards gender equality. This report is the result of a qualitative study carried out by a team of two consultants from KIT (Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam) who attempted to answer some of these questions:

- a) The extent to which gender issues are reflected in the values and principles; and internal cultures, processes, structures, procedures, systems (*including management*) and internal practices
- b) How Nijera Kori's activities at the grass root level ensure gender equality in all sphere of landless people's life and in the society
- c) What are the key lessons learned by Nijera Kori through its years of gender mainstreaming activity and analyze them
- d) What have been the qualitative changes of Nijera Kori's activities upon the lives of poor men and women which ensure gender equity of their daily life?

Method

The team spent a total of 17 person days in Bangladesh between 23 June to 6 July 2007, including field visits for observation, focus group discussions with landless people's groups, staff interviews and stay at field sub-centres (details of respondents are in Annexure One and discussion/interview guides are in Annexure Two).

The scope of investigation included

1. Dhaka Central office
2. Bi-annual staff convention at Nungola
3. Sub Centres (SC) in three divisions (Chittagong, Tangail, Rajshahi - Khulna was under floods in June)
4. Landless organization – groups and committee members
5. Training teams at all levels
6. Cultural Team/ community based cultural teams

The consultant team also reviewed a number of documents including organizational records and reports, and examined other studies on NK (list of reviewed documents is in Reference section).

Framework of gender assessment

Given the unique nature of this organization which has never taken up service provision or micro-credit and has remained consistently an organization of struggles and movements, the framework to undertake a gender impact analysis of NK had to be somewhat different to that applied to conventional development organizations. However, some of the sites of enquiry were the same and relied on the frameworks for gender analysis.

Kabeer's review (2003) 'Making rights work for the poor: Nijera Kori and the construction of "collective capabilities" in rural Bangladesh' defines the NK agenda since its inception as building the **collective capabilities** of poor women and men to claim their rights as citizens rather than as clients, beneficiaries, users, welfare dependents or any of the other "identities" ascribed to the poor by conventional development projects. She uses Sen's human capabilities framework to analyse the NK approach. Human capabilities refers to the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of "being and doing".

Since NK does not provide services or development inputs, the principal means available to NK to build collective capabilities are what Kabeer terms as 'intangible' resources. These include in the NK context mobilisation and organisation building of the poor, networking among the landless organisations, training and solidarity. These kinds of resources are intended to transform the consciousness and agency of samitee members (members of landless organizations). However, as one of the senior members of the central team said, NK cannot change society. It can only provide those inputs that raise the consciousness of the poor in the expectation that people will unite and fight against social injustice. Kabeer echoes this understanding in her paper suggesting that unlike the input-output logic of development programmes, the NK approach cannot predict the result or outcome. This she says is because of the human factor in development which makes it difficult to anticipate changes. Because of this the change pattern is non-linear i.e. the relationship between inputs and the outcome is not straightforward and progressive but that set backs are part of the change process.

Kabeer reviews the work of NK using this framework and measures achievements in terms of human capability building. The present assessment uses the main concepts of this framework and applies it to a specific area of enquiry. We investigate whether and how the intangible resource inputs promote gender transformatory change by raising consciousness about gender inequality and empowering women, and men too, to act against all forms of gender injustice in the public world of politics, the economy and institutions of state, markets and community and private spheres of family, kinship and intimate relations. Human beings are both a means and the end of the development approach pursued by NK. This investigation assesses the achievements of the landless peoples' organisations in terms of their heightened awareness regarding gender issues, new vision of gender aware change and forms of action and practice to entrench these changes. The agents in this development process are also the NK staff members who provide the intangible resources through their interaction with the landless peoples committees. Thus they too are the 'means' in this development process. In assessing 'achievements' the awareness and consciousness of staff members about gender issues, their vision of transformatory change and as well the practice are central to this impact assessment.

There are certain methodological difficulties in assessing gender impact. First, because gender relations are about habits or ways of thinking that are virtually pre-discursive, they are deeply internalised (Goetz 2001). Thus questions about gender relations often cannot be asked with the expectation that answers will reflect what a person believes. The second related difficulty is that when people working in development organisations

are asked about their personal opinion on gender issues, they tend to repeat organisational policy or reproduce the 'politically correct' version rather than what they believe. They are not being untruthful; they respond in this manner because, in most cases, people have not reflected directly or challenged their misconceptions and assumptions about gender equality (Goetz 2001; Mukhopadhyay et al 2006).

Given these constraints and the fact that we could not generate anthropological data over time that could provide insights into gender power relations and the politics of decision-making, the analytical tools used relied on unpacking the discourse about gender relations and issues in the actions and views reported by respondents (both staff and samity members) in interviews and focus group discussions, the organisational reports and written records.

The consultants began with a study of available documents such as the Annual Report 2005-2006, other recent studies, as well as papers published on NK. Based on this, an initial list of issues to be explored was drawn up, but these evolved as the field work progressed. The areas of investigation in the initial list included spheres of gender intervention, analysis of gender relations, inter-sectionalities and male privilege, change and measurement of change, spaces for questioning and gender transformation through movements. These areas were modified and increased as the preliminary interviews took place. (See Annex 2 for Interview Guide with Staff and FGD Guide with landless groups).

The report is organized around the following broad questions:

- i. How has being with NK made a difference to gender relations for staff as well as for landless group members?
- ii. What are the realms where change has occurred towards more equitable gender relations?
- iii. What are the perceptible gaps?
- iv.** How could they be addressed by NK so as to bring about more equitable gender relations?

The report uses direct quotations from interviews which are then interpreted. The quotations provided are not linked to an identifiable staff source in order to protect confidentiality of respondents. However, original field notes have been documented to ensure veracity of information used, and are available with KIT.

Chapter Two: Changes in gender relations among landless groups

"We could never talk to a man without getting a fatwa in our name, we didn't know how to sit in a group, the word 'police' would make us cry. Now we can protest, go on marches, sing along with men. Earlier we were in our husband's control, now we don't need to ask him."

The work over more than two decades has led to huge successes with landless women, in fact the work began earlier with women in most places, and later men's groups were also formed. Consequently there are larger numbers of women's groups (the NK Annual Report 2005-2006 says in March 2006, there were 6423 women's groups with almost 128,000 women members as against 5342 men's groups with 117,434 members).

The interventions of NK have resulted in more equitable gender relations among landless group members both men and women. This is of course with the caveat that the situation of women has changed in Bangladesh as a whole in the 27 years that NK has been working.

A. Reasons for change

Men of the landless group in the Thanar Haat SC area feel there is a **practical advantage** to working with women on an equal footing: *"We relate to each other despite being women and men since we have struggled together with the women against jotedars, police, fundamentalists and others who want to continue injustice: we have been to prison; we have so many cases against us. We realize that women have to be equally involved and active in these struggles."* This extends to changing some roles at home: *"We now cook, help children get ready for school, feed them, clean babies' shit, and fetch medicines – at the NK trainings we learnt we have to do everything ourselves."*

In the Bhatar Tek SC area, men say, *"We used to snigger at the women who came for meetings. But when we had the big struggle against the jotedars and women got injured first in the clashes, I realized we have to work together. We realized they are humans with rights to mobility (earlier I considered them merely as domestic cooks) and can participate in all collective activity."* In the Chandina SC area, men said: *"We realized that even if we restrain our women we are unsuccessful, and anyway, they are going out for a good cause. The entire village gains from their activism."*

Women group members in the Chandina SC area see it from the other side: they decided to engage with men, they say, since: *"We realized that we as a class of poor people are suffering the same denial of rights (as women and men) and being denied protection of the law. We needed to get them to work with us on social justice issues, only then can we bring about social change; we also need their help in strong confrontations."*

Beyond this somewhat instrumental logic, there are also journeys of **personal empowerment and realization**. A woman member of Thanar Haat SC area recalled, *"Once I was beaten violently because I had dared to speak to men; my favourite blouse was torn, it still makes me cry to recall that day. But my group sent my husband for the NK training: today my husband got me a rickshaw so I could attend this meeting. My daughters are going to school; he will serve them the meal before they go."*

Another woman's story at Chandina SC area shows how she discovered her courage after facing repeated domestic violence: her husband used to beat her till she was unconscious, since he couldn't face the fact that she was childless because of him. Finally NK helped her to adopt a daughter and her group members supported her strongly. Now she has been elected as a member in the Union Parishad, and her husband drives her to

meetings in his rickshaw. Recently a maulvi (Muslim cleric) made a comment that annoyed her very much; she grabbed him by his lungi¹ and smacked him on the face.

Male group members of the Thanar Haat SC area also describe changes in their behaviour: *"I used to oppress the woman I married, but then I realize they actually do a lot more work, even if I am the one going out to earn. I stopped beating my wife and now I protest against violence; and as part of my group, I use cultural action to spread the message of the equality of women and men."*

The trainings of NK for landless group members have definitely made an impact in creating a new awareness in the men and women. A Chandina SC Woman group member said, *"Some of the husbands have attended NK trainings, and we have also been explaining what we learnt at the trainings. The training is crucial to take the group forward."* Similarly, a Bhatar Tek SC area male member said, *"Earlier we were not aware, but after attending trainings, I feel I have more awareness about many things, more than a graduate."*

The landless communities have aspirations for their next generation and have tried to make things better for them: in the Char Jabbar SC area, all the women and men group members were non-literate but all of them were sending daughters to school: they have started 5 schools in the area which are run by farming profits and managed locally, and have high attendance.

B. Realms of change

The various realms where change has occurred towards more gender equitable relationships include women members' rights within intimate relationships, access to local justice mechanisms, seclusion and mobility, voice and participation, economic rights and state services.

Perhaps the most dramatic is the change in **seclusion and mobility**, as that is the change that women mention first. It is also noticeable that women and men sit interspersed next to each other at a meeting with no trace of self-consciousness at Thanar Haat SC area, even singing loudly together, although songs and clapping are forbidden in orthodox Islam, according to the staff. Earlier in this region, women spoke to others with a veil or sari hung in between to avoid eye contact. If women encountered a man anywhere they had to sit down and hide beneath two umbrellas so as to cover themselves completely (Reports person of Central team).

In the last few years, the burqa has become increasingly common among women in Bangladesh especially in rural areas. But now according to a woman in Char Jabbar SC area, *"Although the maulvis disapprove when we don't wear the burqa, we do go on marches, to the market, and come out on the streets."* A woman member in Thanar Haat says, *"Earlier it was considered inappropriate to encounter women; we were in complete purdah. Now we can go to markets, hospitals (earlier we remained ill at home), and speak up in public, demand our rights, protest against violence, go to (shalishes) sort out conflicts of any sort; and the women stand by each other."*

A woman member of the Cultural Team in Bhatar Tek is permitted by her husband's family to attend rehearsals late in the evening with male colleagues. In the Tangail SC area, a woman says, *"We could never talk to a man without getting a fatwa in our name, we didn't know how to sit in a group, the word 'police' would make us cry. Now we can protest, go on marches, sing along with men. Earlier we were in our husband's control, now we don't need to ask him."*

¹ Loosely wrapped lower garment for men, knotted at the waist

The other area in which there appears to have been dramatic change in women's roles is their **participation in movements** and struggles. Women and men in the Char Jabbar SC area describe how they have gone through violent struggles because the landless poor were being deprived from *char* land that was meant to be given to them; they talk of how they have faced attacks and arrest, and learnt to fight together, as a result of which they got collective land ownership in 1986. The women describe guarding fields and fish-ponds all night, and harvesting crops sown by the jotedars. The women recall how they once sent the men into hiding when police threatened them and how they beat up policemen who were harassing them with brooms and rods. Two women of the landless organization have become martyrs for the cause: Karunamoyee who died in the protests against shrimp cultivation and Kachhmoti who died in the struggles for Khash land.

Similar stories are recounted in the Bhatar Tek SC area, where women had to struggle for land rights (now they control 382 acres); the women's groups played a major role in taking over the land, sowing and harvesting, despite physical battles with blood on the streets. As a consequence of their frontline roles in such struggles, women gained land ownership jointly with the men as collective property.

Along with this comes a realization of the fact that 'women have rights too' – in fact **women's human rights** is a revelation for landless group members who have been in NK training programmes. *"Earlier we thought as women we had no rights to go anywhere: after the NK training we know our rights",* says a woman of Thanar Haat. A male group member says, *"I went to the training learnt about the five basic human rights for women and men. I realized women are also human beings with the same basic rights."* The acknowledgement of women as rights-holders fuels strong protest against violence faced by women in the domestic sphere and in public: the protests organized by women of the Chandina SC area against the minor girl Rasheda's gang-rape and burning alive is a case in point.

In Thanar Haat, a woman member says, *"Earlier we were beaten by our husbands and taunted by our in-laws for attending NK trainings. Now I can attempt to explain to them, and I hope to build confidence in younger women too."* In Chandina SC area, women add, *"We used to get beaten for any little fault although we worked more than men. But now that is over. ...Now we wouldn't stand by and watch if there is domestic violence, we would all protest, even if she is not from our group. If there is a death, we would refuse to let the body go and insist on post-mortem.... If a woman is crying, her neighbours would inform the group and we get to know."*

The realm of **rights within intimate relationships** also witness moves towards more gender equitable relations. In Char Jabbar SC area, women point out, "Housework still remains women's work, but women have more control over family income, marriages of daughters – '*aamra purush mani naa*' (we do not obey someone just because they are male).

An indication is that the age at marriage has gone up in most places visited in this assessment. In Thanar Haat SC area, women point out, *"We also don't have polygamy any more, we now understand our rights and get marriages registered – we would protest otherwise. We understand that marriages when women are too young may lead to less use of family planning methods, maternal deaths, infant deaths, illnesses, more domestic violence, divorce and polygamy."* The staff also point out that earlier, marriages were solemnized in the mosque without the bride necessarily being present, but now the Qazi comes home after the women protested.

One perceptible shift is in the allocation of household roles, with **men trying out newer roles** even at the risk of ridicule. In Bhatar Tek SC area, men share that they have learnt to cook rice, wash the children, and try to share roles. *"Earlier all the work was left for*

women, and we never told them what we did, what we spent. Now I know why I should ask her." In Chandina SC area, a male group member said, "Actually women work endlessly, but we realize their work is not valued at all. Now if she doesn't have time to cook before a meeting, I would cook, and help with other chores. The others laugh when I wash my wife's clothes." In Tangail SC area, men say, "But now we share our problems, relations have changed. We would consult our wives for important family decisions ... We realize they do many tasks while we do just one job, so they should get equal rights."

Within the public realm, women landless group members have been able to increase their **political participation** in terms of access, presence and influence. In Thanar Haat SC area, woman said, "After the trainings, we learnt about the 5 basic rights and realized that we don't have to look up to or wait for men (to give us permission) – now we can go to meetings, gatherings, marches, and participate in elections." In Chandina SC area, women recall, "We didn't know what a vote meant. Now we know what politics is, what each party stands for, we know that voting is a right that we enjoy as citizens. We realized we shouldn't vote into power those who will later oppress us and destroy our country... Our eyes and ears have been opened, and now 'bibechna kortey paari' (we can debate the merits and decide)... Now we vote for our own candidates who can raise questions in the Union Parishad."

Women have been elected as Union Parishad Members from the same group in Chandina area and they have a story of how they challenged even the Parishad Chairman: there were five landless group members including three women who were being consistently by-passed in decision-making. They managed to lobby another 5 or 6 members to pass a No-Confidence motion against the Chairman for irregularities. The matter got into a physical brawl and the landless group members finally dunked the Chairman in cold water on a winter day! Despite a Minister's protection for the Chairman, he ended up being arrested. This anecdote indicates the level of women's confidence to engage with political actors. The Annual Report of 2005-2006 data also shows that 65 women landless group members have been elected to the Union Parishad as compared to 84 male members: the high female – male ratio indicates women's ability to engage with political roles. Additionally, women have applied to the Health Ministry to successfully demand a satellite clinic in the Char areas.

Concurrently, women have greater **presence and influence over the local adjudication mechanisms** called Shalish. The landless women group members are even attending the Shalish in the capacity of jurors, something unheard of in areas where earlier women would be sent away from the house where a Shalish was being held. In all the SC areas visited, women group members talk of sitting next to the men in Shalish, participating in the discussion and "pointing out mistakes." They have several anecdotes about how they have influenced verdicts in favour of women's rights, especially where property rights or sexual transgressions are involved. A case in point is the long-drawn out Shalish solved by women of the Tangail SC area, where a boy's father was demanding Tk 50,000 as dowry after his son already had an ongoing relationship with the girl. The women put in a complaint about the dowry demand and asked the boy's father to compensate the girl with land for his son's pre-marital sex.

C. Gaps perceived

A member of the Central Team questions whether NK has analyzed "gender relations as seen in the lived experience of women, at a practical level not on theoretical level" and gives the example of whether NK has really understood why young women are opting for the burqa. There is a doubt expressed whether NK has taken up women's issues "beyond a **formulaic commitment** to all forms of social equality".

There are certainly larger numbers of women's groups, but as a woman member in Chandina pointed out, *"Women are oppressed and deprived, so we easily came together."* Despite the presence of women on all kinds of committees, women in the Thanar Haat area disclosed, *"Men still try to control us by speaking in a harsh way; they do comment if we go out. They still try to silence us on committees and do not really want us to speak. We are only there as a show of gender equality."*

There is also a concern that the impact of NK's work on gender relations has **not extended beyond group members**: a man in Thanar Haat SC area admitted, *"Beyond the group members, families still give daughters less food – our daughters face this discrimination in their marital homes. Women have not yet realized their rights – especially in property issues."* Women in Bhatar Tek SC area point out, *"If the husband is not a group member then he would stop his wife from attending meetings, there would be quarrels, and she would face social disapproval ... Poorer non-literate women are still very much under their husband's control..."*

Despite the strong movements of landless groups against violence against women, **domestic violence and dowry** continue to remain widespread social problems. This was admitted by women everywhere, and in some cases even men. A Central Team member doubts whether the landless groups' response against incidents of VAW is because of good mobilization or out of real conviction. Women in Thanar Haat area acknowledge, *"Domestic violence continues; dowry too is still very strong. I still see domestic violence in every home and women are silent about it. We have a lot of quarrels and violence on the use of money and children's education."* Women in Tangail SC area admit: *"Some group members continue to give or take dowry even in inter-group marriages, they refuse to get united against it. There is too much greed involved."* The men add, *"Women are still not safe and free to move about, unlike men. Dowry is still demanded and given, only not so openly any more, and mostly in kind."*

Although men feel they have taken on new **roles within the household**, it doesn't appear to be the norm: on a regular basis, women continue with their household responsibilities. As the women in Thanar Haat said, *"We still have the major share of cooking and childcare, men don't help at home as much as we have taken on outside roles."* In the Bhatar Tek SC area, women said, *"Actually men don't really help in the kitchen; women still do most of the cooking."* In Tangail SC area, women said, *"Men still expect us to do the cooking, would yell at us otherwise. They don't realize the children are theirs too, and they should share childcare roles. They do just one job all day whereas we have so many small tasks with no wages for it. Our agriculture brings in less money than theirs."*

The issue of increased **wages for women workers** is an interesting case. A Central Team member questions why the kinds of work women do have not changed, they still have a limited choice of livelihoods. *"Women's wage improvement helps the family, that is why men support their struggles – but that does not change gender roles within the household."* A woman in Thanar Haat shared, *"We hesitate to spend and tend to save or share, avoiding needless buying. Men think it is their right to ask for pocket-money to spend at shops since women do not go there."*

The Training Evaluation consultant observed, *"The wage equality issue hasn't really been understood – men do not want women to get equal wages since that would lessen their own superiority."* The women of Tangail area disclosed the real reason why the landless groups have to accept lower wages for women: *"Now that we are doing hard work women get Tk 50-70 and men get Tk 100. It has been discussed at meetings; we managed to get it raised by Tk 10 through united efforts. The landowners say why should I give women work if you ask for the same wages as men, I call you because you are cheaper."* Within this logic, women's right to equal wages can never be claimed.

Some figures of the Annual Report of 2005-2006 reveal the comparative economic positions. Table 13 indicates the joint economic activities for 1440 women's groups and 1903 men's groups, in which men's groups have more economic activities such as agriculture, fisheries, livestock, but half the total number of women's groups are engaged in small businesses. The investment in small businesses is around one-sixth the total investment amount, and it reflects a very marginal increase in the course of a year. It emerges that women's economic activities have not been a growth area. Table 08 shows that women's groups have saved one and half times as men's groups. In Table 17, of the various activities undertaken from group savings, and the largest outlay has been for weddings (Tk.144,445 for 159 'weddings without dowry' in the year) followed by village conventions (Tk.142,305 for 232 village conventions).

Similarly in the realm of **reproductive decision making it may seem as if women are in charge since it is** women not men who are expected to arrange for spacing or birth control. What is at stake here is that male attitudes and responsibility for family planning has not altered significantly. In Char Jabbar SC area, it turned out only 1 woman's husband out of 15 uses contraception. In the Thanar Haat SC area, out of all the 15 or 20 men present, only 2 had gone through vasectomy. Out of 15 women in the discussion, none of their husbands had taken responsibility for contraception. In the Bhatar Tek area, out of 13 women, two of their husbands used contraception. In Tangail SC area, out of 8 women, all of them had to take responsibility for contraception; in Chandina area, except for one, all the other women had to do likewise.

Despite the shared roles in activism and movements, it appears that the **sphere of intimate relations** have not significantly changed much after interventions by NK. In Thanar Haat area, women said, "*Women are taunted for having so many children. We can't refuse sex; it would lead to violence and comments on our character.*" A woman member in the Char Jabbar area said, "*It is always women who shoulder that responsibility - women wouldn't suffer poor health if men paid attention to this: men desire to become fathers soon after marriage.*" In Chandina women group members who are otherwise very outspoken and confident, disclosed, "*Men seem to desire repeated childbearing until sons are born. Contraception is by and large women's responsibility, if they are not up to it, they have to continue childbearing.*"

'The Nijeri Kori philosophy is that poor women and men have common interests, and are exploited by the same system. This philosophy generates a gender strategy which emphasizes creating ways for women and men to work together in greater equality, in contrast to the sex segregated and unequal society in which they live.' (Jolly, 2004) What this misses out is that women and men do not necessarily have either the same interests or the same historical disadvantages. Unless this fundamental aspect is addressed, several dimensions of gender relations will remain unchallenged.

D. Discussion

The findings from the field show clearly that among the landless groups, women have gained a chance to have extra-familial associations, and gain 'voice'; be part of *movements and political engagement*. Consequently they are enthusiastic about group formation. They have greatly increased their *mobility* and have gained a different perspective on rights within intimate relationships. The abjuring of service-delivery by NK has led to a sustained focus on empowerment and conscientization efforts over decades, which have great potential for challenging and transforming unequal power relations.

However, the changes in women's political associations and mobility have not extended to *equality within sexual relationships* nor has it led to a change in women's *roles of social reproduction* within households. The critical assumption has been that if women come into public sphere, their problems will be solved. As such it has been not so much a struggle for women's autonomy as a struggle to attain the entitlements that landless

communities have been deprived of, including development. Sexual freedoms are not part of public development concerns, thus the women's question *could not become an autonomous struggle* for women's freedom.

The changes remain *limited to women group members* and have not extended to *systemic transformation*. Women do not have a clear vision of a different future. Dowry continues to remain the norm in marriages, marriage continues to remain the only option for the next generation, and 'daughters still face discrimination in marital homes;' in a sense the vulnerability of women persists. The *material bases of gender division* have certainly been challenged by the joint leases of the collective Char land, but they have not been transformed by either equal wages for women or enhanced income and livelihood opportunities for women. Economic activities for women have not progressed sufficiently, and in the *absence of life choices beyond marriage*, the possibilities of structural change are few. With the absence of strong gender analysis, this has led to re-affirmation and reproduction of the existing gender ideologies.

Chapter Three: Institutional interventions and gender relations within the organization

“I can’t think of working anywhere else – here it’s not a job, it is real work”
(Member, Central Team)

“After marriage I discovered that my father-in-law was very conservative and authoritarian. My husband could not raise his voice against his father. I had one daughter. My husband did not oppose me but did not support me either. I left the baby with my mother and went to work for NK. I founded a new family with the nine workers at a NK base camp”.
(Field Organiser)

The work over 27 years among landless group members indicates that being with NK has made a significant difference to them at the personal level, as well as enabled them to work with each other more or less as equals. It is relevant here to examine the organization NK itself in terms of its institutional capacity to promote equitable gender relations.

A. Leadership profile

The organization is led by a woman, Khushi Kabir who although herself from an urban middle-class background has been working with the landless poor for nearly three decades. She has challenged many gender norms in her personal life. Her vision is that ‘*men need to change*’, not in a patronizing or ‘sympathetic’ way, and she is convinced it is not enough to work only with women. Under her leadership the organization has remained true to its original focus on the struggles of the working classes; working on poverty and social justice, within which gender equality is prominently included.

The democratic structure and participatory processes followed at all levels are inherent to the organizational philosophy. There has been a steadfast refusal to bow to donor dictates and follow a service delivery model, including micro-credit, which is the norm in practically all NGOs of Bangladesh. The organization has instead used the Freireian approach of conscientization and mass mobilization. These elements do impact on a different gender discourse.

The Central Team of the organization has a clear gender balance, including very senior women and men as Organizers and Trainers. Formal education has not been a barrier to attaining the top posts², and most of them have started out as field workers. Most of them have been re-elected to their posts for over two decades. The organizational male leadership has mostly been associated with left movements and the women leaders have come from other NGOs; all have either been active in or sympathized with the liberation struggle in Bangladesh which had a strongly secular socialist vision for the country. Around one-fourth of the staff are Hindus (including in the Central Team), and the organization has tried to bring in marginal groups such as tribal and disabled people.

Three people out of the eight-member Central Team have a strong intuitive understanding of gender equality, and have critically perceived the gaps in the organization. One woman Central Team member said, “*We have to go beyond increasing numbers to changing attitudes, viewpoints through gender training and gender*

² However since the trend of student study circles have almost disappeared, NK upgrades their staff through ‘schooling sessions’, which entail considerable reading; as a result now the minimum staff qualification is graduation.

workshops which we should put into the work plan." Another woman Central Team member pointed out, *"I am willing to do the same work as male staff, even at night; most women staff could also overcome their fears but male colleagues are not letting them. That is why women are unable to come to leadership."*

The second-line women leaders have *"coped with their ideology and failed marriages and are empathetic to other women staff,"* feels Khushi Kabir, *"which may enable women staff to disclose their problems to them."* This is echoed by a woman Central Team member who says, *"We try to interact separately with women staff in the Sub-centres or during trainings and try to understand their experiences and hear out their accusations ... Women disclose that although they are social activists, they have to hand over their pay to the male family member."* This hard-hitting disclosure is an indication of the highly unequal gender relations that women activists in Bangladesh have to face.

Nonetheless, the organization has taken several steps to improve the situation of women staff and to ensure a gender equitable working situation. It is significant that one woman in the Central Team says, *"I can't think of working anywhere else – here it's not a job, it's work."* Another says, *"I have understood inequality deeply in my own life; my personal struggles as a woman were supported by being in NK where I gained courage and the language of protest. Now I have found a place to accept myself the way I am."*

B. Institutional mechanisms

The organization works at four levels:

- i. Sub-Centres (or Camps) in the field that are the offices and living quarters for the field workers, these are led by Sub-Centre leaders (Programme Organizers or PO)
- ii. Anchal headquarters (or Area), with the Anchal president and PO
- iii. Divisional headquarters with Divisional President, two Organizers and cultural staff. The HQ would include a Divisional Training Centre with Trainer (who has eight Training Cell members on call)
- iv. Central Team at Dhaka Central office, with three Central Trainers, three Organizers and the Coordinator, and there is a Central Cultural team based elsewhere.

The staff are *recruited through advertisements* (including women-only ads), and to avoid a certain kind of hierarchy, it has been decided not to lower the qualification for women candidates but to insist on a graduation for women and men alike. The interview includes some questions on the situation of women, and women candidates given a handicap in marking. However, fewer women apply; in fact the ratio is 3:1, and staff members do leave upon being posted to the field. Of the 453 new staff inducted from 2001-2007, around 53.5% male staff members have left as compared to 61.5% female staff³.

Once appointed, the staff members are sent in groups into sub-centres for their six-month orientation, and they also attend various training programmes. After that they are considered full-fledged workers and get their posting at any sub-centre. Within the Sub-centre professional life revolves around a twenty four hour and seven days a week schedule, with no weekly holiday: there is a schooling session on Fridays when field work is not possible. The *women staff members are usually posted in their home division* and male staff in the neighbouring division. There are Sub-centres that have no women staff at all, due to lack of security or poor transport linkages.

Within sub-centres, there are simple but adequate arrangements for the women and men to stay in dormitories, with full provision of hot cooked meals. All the staff members have to do is keep their own things tidy, wash their own clothes and clean their own used dishes. A Central team member said Sub-centres were organized so that *"women staff*

³ Source - Central team communication on Email

can move ahead without having to worry about childcare” and similar reproductive roles. The five sub-centres observed appeared to be adequate without being luxurious: they look like improved rural middle-class homes and some of them may not have electricity. Some Sub-centres are attached to Training Centres or are Anchal headquarters, and may have slightly better facilities with gardens and ponds. Married staff members have permission for their spouse to visit up to a week at a stretch. Women also get 4 months of maternity leave with provisions to bring children with a baby-sitter with them on campus until the child is 12 years old.

The organizational set-up is based on *democratic participation*, and staff members become eligible for elections for posts in staff councils at various levels (including Sub-Centre, Anchal, Division and Central); in case of being elected, the posting may not be in the desired divisions. A woman Divisional Co-Organizer pointed out, “*Women have been elected to Sub-centre leaders, and to Anchal Chairperson. In 4 of the Sub-centres there are women leaders (one in each Anchal) – which shows that women have confidence and capacity. ‘Karuna noy, aamra parchhi’ (it’s not because of pity, we can actually perform). Women get elected because they have experience, analysis and commitment.*”

But there are no women elected as Division Organizer, Trainer or Chairperson, which was why NK decided three years ago to have *quotas for women* as Divisional Co-Organizers. Similarly the Training Cells at Divisional levels have provision for reserved seats: at least 2 women field workers have to be elected trainers. It is possible that *women in positions of leadership may have an effect on other women staff members* - one woman leader of a Sub-centre doubles up as Divisional Training Cell member; she feels that since she became Sub-centre leader, no woman staff has left from their team.

There are some non-negotiable *staff rules that relate to gender equal behaviour* and financial transparency. One person was sacked for sexually harassing a cook at Sub-centre, and the incident is meticulously documented. A Central Team member says, “*We would take strong action on any incident of disrespect towards women.*” The organization appears determined to prevent any sexual harassment of the women staff.

A persistent problem has been the poor retention of women workers and their numbers are steadily decreasing (see Table 1 below). There are no women members in the Central Cultural team, several Sub-Centres have no women staff and very few women who have come into leadership positions without special reservations. The recruitment, retention and professional development of women staff has not grown in keeping with the progress in other aspects of the organization.

Table One: Staff gender breakup at NK, March 2007

| Description | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------------------------------|------|--------|-------|
| Staff at field | 235 | 103 | 338 |
| Staff at head office administration | 9 | 15 | 24 |
| Service staff | 100 | 10 | 110 |
| Total – March 2007 | 344 | 128 | 472 |
| Total – March 2006 | 318 | 143 | 461 |

C. Staff Capacity building

There are two major ways by which NK builds staff capacities: residential training programmes and the monthly schooling at Anchal level. The training programmes are carried out at regular intervals for which there is an annual plan, and there is provision for sustained follow-up of each participant. There is a **three-tier system of training**

programmes: first, middle and advanced levels, followed by basic and advanced cultural trainings. The main approach is 'participatory methods based on Freire⁴.' There are also issue-based trainings on land laws, citizen rights and the constitution, and on globalization and development. A few gender trainings have been held in the last few years, with the support of a resource person from India.

The trainings are held in one of the four Divisional Training Centres, where the residential trainings are conducted by a cadre of organizational trainers; this includes the elected Central Team (which has three trainers with a quota-based gender balance) and the elected Divisional Trainer (usually male) assisted by a Training Cell comprising four women and four men who are field workers based in Sub-centres. The Training Cell members are appointed (not elected) and have to give time for the trainings based on an annual work-plan. Currently the Central Training team has one graduate, and includes two women and one man. Most of them have been 'elected' to this post for around 20 years. All trainers are also expected to be part of field activities.

The sessions regarding women's issues are called 'Discussion on Women's Problems.' The Central Team says, "We encourage participants to analyze their own reality as men and women, their roles, decisions and behaviour." The discussion content includes: understanding oppression, what are 'women's problems' in the country such as dowry, maternal health, acid violence, domestic violence and socialization as women; why the situation of women remains unequal despite laws for equality, and so forth. According to the Central Training team: "We also have group discussions; we also provide an analysis of the social structure, comparing the access to rights of women and men ... Then we try to put it in a framework towards deciding what will be our roles to remove these disparities and discrimination...through changing attitudes, practice and perspectives. ... Men have to first change, since the system has favored them for so long but that needs more effort to change; men will have to practice equality in workplace and family and influence men around them."

The training content does not appear to include any history of the women's movement (globally, regionally or in Bangladesh) or discussions on women's use of agency; neither are there references to current feminist debates. The Coordinator of NK rues, "The Training Team has been unable to keep pace with the changed strategic issues in the context of changed reality. There is not enough analysis, and limited innovation on the established pattern." However members of the Central Training team felt that while the core goals of the organization have not changed in 27 years, the training content was reviewed constantly: "we assess learning needs and keep going to the field... Our method is not only lecture but also reading. It is focused on facts, analysis, logic; we also give handouts (but there are no handouts on gender issues)." An observation by the Training Review consultant was that "trainers do not seem to have much time for preparation or study due to the load of field work; there are no modules (only a training outline), and no detailed reports are prepared. The methodology is not too participatory: it is more theoretical with very few examples."

The second important system of continued education of staff is the '**Schooling**' which means that all staff members attend a study-circle every month convened by the Anchal President at the start of monthly meetings. One or two staff members take prior responsibility to read up and prepare a presentation on a book or article and share it at the meeting, after which there is meant to be discussion. This pattern is evident even in large staff conventions, and appears to be a way to build capacity of ordinary young people who did not have the best opportunities for education, were not from the more elite classes but were nevertheless 'leading' people in the rural areas. It builds skill in organizing their thoughts, doing research on a topic and presenting a logical argument, and is also an exercise in public speaking.

⁴ Paolo Freire a Brazilian educator who used 'conscientization' methods with adult literacy learners

However, the *content* of several schooling sessions need to be more closely examined for discussion on gender issues and current debates. A study of the schooling sessions of one Anchal from April 2006 to January 2007 revealed that they were studying fairly old texts, and all texts related to Communist history and analyses. Examples include – The Communist Manifesto, a book on the Communist Revolution, Historical Materialism, The Development of Society and Civilization, and so on. There is no analyses of the Communist world after the end of Soviet Russia and the rise of capitalism in China. The versions of history being studied are also extremely outdated. The reports of the discussions indicate that there was unsatisfactory staff participation according to the President. There were *no recent publications and no materials related to gender issues* or the women's movement.

The speeches given by the Chairpersons at such sessions also need closer analysis. The monthly meeting speeches of one Anchal Chairperson studied (April 06 – Jan 07) were an exhortation towards socialist visions of society and the analysis of current affairs provided is strongly reminiscent of left dogma from a bygone era, glorifying the Communist revolution and vilifying capitalism and globalization. There are sweeping statements of the progress of mankind and science, about poverty in the country and the travails of the poor in courts. There is *no mention of gender concerns* in a whole year in the speeches studied, except as a passing reference to the ill-effects of rising religious fundamentalism. There appears to be a strong preference for meta-narratives⁵ that are not grounded in any substantial analysis of current reality or any strategic re-thinking towards change. It also appears that the *social analysis has not moved beyond what it was before 1990*: in that sense it is based on an extremely outdated view of world history.

D. Organizational culture

The sense in which we use the term 'culture' refers to Stuart Hall's (1981) explanation that the term refers to the wide and available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences. In this sense it is more about the common ideas available to talk about, react to and act upon a certain situation. Culture is often used to refer to 'social practices'. Culture is not a practice, nor is it the sum total of traditions and mores. Rather it is the common experiences / ideas that are threaded through all social practices in a specific society and at any given moment of time. It is in this sense that the term culture will be used in examining the lived experiences and practices of Nijera Kori. This is because organisational culture is composed of the common experiences / ideas informing practice, including the meanings and definitions of what it is to be a woman or man, and what constitutes their relationship, claims and entitlements. These are central to the definition of social life and life within organisations.

Thus in studying organizational culture we included staff practice, values and norms, learning approaches, communication patterns and so forth. According to our observations those aspects of the organisational culture that have significant influence on the way in which staff members think about and act on gender issues are four-fold. These include the culture of sacrifice or 'ashram' culture; the culture of acquiescence or decorum, a learning culture that is doctrinaire and reminiscent of the Marxist Study Circles and finally a protectionist and conservative culture.

⁵ A **metanarrative** (sometimes **master-** or **grand narrative**) is an abstract idea that is supposed to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge. Metanarratives can literally be stories that are told in order to legitimise various versions of "the truth". The scepticism about metanarratives arises for the following reasons. First, attempts to construct grand theories tend to dismiss the naturally existing chaos and disorder of the universe. Second, metanarratives are created and reinforced by [power structures](#) and are therefore those who have power over are in a position to make their version of the truth acceptable. 'Metanarratives' ignore the heterogeneity or variety of human existence.

☞ *Culture of sacrifice/Ashram culture:*

The Sub-centres are the crucible where the newly recruited staff are moulded into future field workers and perhaps leaders. Here although the professional realm exists within the domestic space of a residential centre, there are few associations with domestic roles, especially for male workers. The women workers may bring in children and child-care support; male workers have never done so. There is no provision for posting spouses in the same sub-centre, in fact that is discouraged. All domestic arrangements are handled by other support staff, leaving field staff free to focus on their professional roles. The space is constructed as an 'Ashram', or an ascetic space where living and working are inextricably inter-twined; there is no personal life and very little outside social life. One is compelled to live and spend all one's time with colleagues. The space is also open to the landless group members at all times, either for 'drop-in' or in case of any emergency, so the Sub-centres avoid having anything ostentatious or out of keeping with the life of the rural poor.

This kind of space is hailed by male staff as being appropriate for their life of sacrifice for a social cause. A senior male staff at Char Jabbar does not spend more than two months a year with his family, although he has a one and half year old son: it is constructed as a personal sacrifice since the work involves the good of poor people. Missing out on the upbringing of the children and living away from families was justified because he was fulfilling a moral obligation which is larger than family: *"you can't live with your family and keep your ideals alive... We have to be really immersed in field issues all the time, even during meals: we can't switch off like people who live and work from home."* This separation from ordinary people provides a self-righteous slant to men's self-perception, and obscures the fact that being away from home also frees them of all reproductive responsibilities.

A male Divisional Trainer proudly says, *"Ami nijer family'r kotha bhulei jai* (I forget all about my family) – I do not take care of my children", and yet he also feels that female staff should handle childcare responsibilities since *"Ma'key shontan kachhey rakhtey hoy* (the mother has to keep the child with her)." Paradoxically, despite their support for the traditional gender division of labour in which women have to take on childcare, male workers denigrate women's inability to take on full-time professional roles: *"Women can't make the same sacrifices as men."*

Female staff on the other hand welcome the fact that "At least no one here talks about marriage or comments on my having a job;" since this gender-neutral space is free of the hostility women face in their domestic life. At the same time, women activists are not completely free of their roles of social reproduction: they are obliged to eventually get married, bear children and take care of these children; if needed leave their jobs to be in a place where the child can attend school. This may mean leaving NK, and they are blamed by almost everyone for doing so. It is seen as women's failure to negotiate social pressures, to struggle with their families, and they are labeled as lacking social responsibility and commitment.

A Central Team woman member says, *"Women aspire to get husbands with good jobs (possibly with bribes) – they do not have high social commitment or a social service outlook and a sense of social responsibility. There is a reluctance and lack of readiness among the women whom we want to push forward into leadership; they don't want 24x7 jobs without time to relax while spending time with children."* The highly gendered assumption here is that women who 'spend time with children' are somehow not fulfilling their higher potential, and are not performing any socially relevant role.

The 'motherism' is heightened by female workers exonerating male colleagues for not playing similar roles on a full-time basis: "Men cannot look after children – *"chhuti chhara to parbey na"* (unless they take leave from work)," said a female field worker at Char Jabbar. This completely overlooks the fact that women staff are taking care of children while doing a full-time job. However, there are exceptions: a female Sub-centre leader and her husband take turns keeping their small son with them, since she has been able to convince him to share the role. Yet her senior, a woman Divisional Co-organizer believes, *"Bacchar jonmer porey bishesh kore mayer shathey'i shomporko beshi"* (children are closer to their mothers after birth). Another experienced woman field worker believes *"women have to obey their husbands in deciding to continue or leave their job."* A woman member of the Central Team also feels, *"Women have to think about children since they are mothers."*

Thus to conclude, living in this ashram-like environment gives men especially a way to justify not taking any reproductive responsibilities for families by claiming that they are working for the higher good. The model of the worker in this setting is the man; therefore women workers do not last long. Since women apparently leave because of their family responsibilities, men learn that women are not as selfless as them and cannot devote their lives to social causes and the greater 'good'. The equation is that a male worker is a self-sacrificing ascetic while a female worker is materialist, immersed in family life and given to trivial pursuits. Thus the Sub-centres are actively involved in the production and reproduction of prevailing notions of gender identity and difference. And because the ability to work for the greater good and give up family life is seen to be superior and is a male quality, men retain their superior standing in the status order.

☞ *Culture of acquiescence/decorum*

NK is a very democratic organization with regular elections for the posts of Executive Council consisting of 3 Central Organizers and 3 Trainers and 4 Divisional Presidents, as well as for 4 Divisional Trainers and 4 Organizers, all the Anchal Presidents and all Programme Organizers who lead Sub-centres. These elections normally take place at the Bi-Annual Staff Conventions, one of which was observed by the Gender Assessment Team (June 2007). The election exercise was modeled on internal party elections. In the case of the NK elections there did not seem to be any contest to any of the posts. Generally one would expect that one or more persons would be nominated and that those who elect would have a choice, but that was not the case. It was observed that the 'election' was largely procedural and the outcomes were predictable.

This form of elections poses constraints as well as gives opportunities to promote women's leadership. The system does have affirmative action (quotas) in that a certain number of women have to be nominated and elected. This means that some women do get in and they cannot be dislodged as long as the affirmative action is in place. Jolly (2004) shows through a table the present status of women's leadership in the organisation.

| Position | Coordinator | Central office team | Divisional president | Anchal president | Sub-centre leader | Central Office staff |
|----------|-------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Women | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 15 |
| Men | 0 | 3 | 4 | 16 | 43 (23 sub-centres are men only) | 13 |

Source: Jolly, 2004:22

There is no organizational policy limiting the number of times a person can be re-elected to a particular post to continue with the same job description. Some people are 'elected'

to their posts for the twentieth time, which is not a democratic outcome and discourages new people from developing leadership aspirations. It also discourages innovations, strategic re-thinking and challenges to the status quo, and builds a culture of acquiescence. As the Coordinator of NK observed, "*People have been re-elected for so long that they have become entrenched. They have become dogmatic in approach because they didn't take any risks to change anything.*" The posts are also paid positions which means that incumbents cannot be easily changed.

There appears to be an unspoken agreement that organizational decorum must always be maintained. The large events and the sub-centres are run with strict discipline, and all arrangements are extremely well-managed. The staff participates in all discussions through well-organized question and answer sessions, with equal space given to men and women. The observation of the Staff bi-Annual Convention (June 07) and the Anchal Monthly meeting reports (April 06 to Jan 07) indicate a similar pattern. Field workers do raise well-thought out questions about very real problems: basic strategies, response to organized fundamentalism, staff capacity building and retention, organizational reflection, women's issues and tribal issues. Taking up some of the issues would have meant really re-thinking the way NK operates, does training and other work.

Yet, none of the questions or problems were addressed to any degree of satisfaction: the answers from the leadership are usually formulaic and without substance. The suggestions if any, are routine and banal; the hard-hitting questions and requests from the staff are avoided or fairly superficial solutions are offered. There appears to be hardly any analysis of reports presented or any reflection on lessons learnt from mistakes, or the need for strategic re-thinking. Very basic staff requisitions are ignored in meeting after meeting and they continue to be politely raised over and over again. Nonetheless, despite this evasive approach, *no open or persistent challenge to the leadership* was observed. On the contrary, the level of organizational discipline and loyalty is quite high: when asked a question regarding turnover of female staff, similar answers are provided by staff across the organisation. All of them view the problem as being outside the organization.

This disturbing trend towards formulaic thinking and responses was also observed during a focus group discussion with female sub-centre staff in the Chittagong Division. The older woman worker was prone to giving formulaic answers without any personal understanding of gender issues, and was unable to acknowledge that there could be any possible difference in the way women and men staff lived and worked in the Sub-centre. The newer women workers were able to reflect more honestly and give sensitive replies; they had less difficulty in acknowledging that the organization or the sub-centre did have discriminatory rules for women. Similarly during a focus group discussion with women workers from various locations, the replies parroted out of the Communist Manifesto displayed an astonishing level of dogmatism and *inability to analyse the situation in the light of their own and other women's experiences.*

The methods originally developed by Paolo Freire promoted questioning of all accepted truths, critiquing the very means of knowledge production. Feminist epistemologies have always been built on a culture of questioning, of rejecting familiar answers and discovering newer approaches to age-old problems through developing a *critical consciousness*. But in a setting where hierarchies are quite firmly entrenched, here-and-now analysis is implicitly discouraged, and there is staff acceptance of the evasion of fundamental questions, the very culture of debate is undermined and it is difficult to have a discussion on gender equality.

By default, there is a reproduction of existing notions of gender difference: "*Women workers everywhere have a far greater workload,*" says a Central Team Organizer, "*but that is not given any value.*" Women work longer hours with less mobility, yet they defer to male staff and accept the norms of male gendered behaviour. Men prefer to 'rest or lie

idle' when they don't have field work, they attend fewer meetings, yet men continue to be elected to leadership posts over and over again. As one of the male workers said, '*amader manoshikota bodlai ni*' (our attitude has not changed).

☞ *The organizational culture of study circles –*

NK leadership has several people who have been part of the Marxist movement in Bangladesh. These political movements have lost strength within the country. Those who were part of these political struggles find that they can only work within a social justice organization like NK to take forward this vision of a society without class. An organizational vision of society that is socialist in orientation is definitely an advantage in that it focuses strategies on raising awareness of those who suffer injustice and helps them to act on their own situation. This distinctive vision sets NK apart from the mainstream development organizations in Bangladesh whose vision of social transformation shifts according to the latest trends in development thinking of the donor and development research community.

However, this heritage of socialist organizing has its downsides in that it comes with a specific organizational and pedagogical culture inimical to analysis and questioning. In many aspects of the organization the culture is strongly reminiscent of old style Marxist study circles. The strict organizational discipline, the unreflective manner of teaching class analysis, the insistence on "*facts, analysis, logic*" and discomfort with untidy matters like female sexuality; the regular 'elections' that largely serve to perpetuate the status quo of entrenched hierarchy; the life in collectives – 'communes'; the proliferation of committees at every level, and the use of non-religious cultural action to build mass awareness, all recall these approaches.

The study circle is also replicated in the Schooling sessions that are held every month at every Anchal at the start of the three-day staff meeting. The topics studied (according to a review of one Anchal's reports) appear to draw heavily on socialist dogma. This also forms the major content of the trainings given to staff and landless group members. The trainers use the nineteenth century Engels writing that links patriarchy historically to the rise of private property, establishment of class, and the resultant 'degradation of women' as capitalist society was gradually formed. "*We explain that gender division is the result of class division; we explain patriarchy and how it is propagated and how men dominate women, how women have to suppress their desires and aspirations; how men are oppressed by society and women are oppressed both by patriarchal society and family,*" says a member of the Central Team. The Coordinator comments, "*Some colleagues are not comfortable with seeing patriarchy as distinct from class struggle.*"

Gender equality is wholly conflated with the class struggle, and the organizational vision of social change culminates in the abolition of class inequality, as shown by the responses from a wide range of respondents who were asked about their dream of a gender-equal society. A group of women workers declare, "*A stateless, communist society where all people will be equal; a state of mass consciousness (gana chetana).*" Male field workers of one sub-centre affirm, "*There will be no more class.*" The Central Training team members declaim, "*Capitalism is affecting human values and culture; women do not get any respect in a capitalist society; we have a vision of a socialist society where women can be seen as human beings – if we can bring about socialism, women will become equal.*" Women landless group members in Tangail faithfully repeat, "*If we get a socialist society where there is not so much private property, there will be equality and everything will change for women: we learnt this at the training.*"

One perceptive Central Team member pointed out, "*Staff members are spouting Marxist theory, not related to real life – we need more debate... The analysis of social issues does not always extend to women's issues: women's issues are seen as social aberrations needing reformative action... Staff members believe that class struggles will end all*

inequality – but we need to realize and consider that women have separate problems, separate interests.”

Within this framework, however, NK holds that poor women and men have overlapping interests since both are oppressed by class division, and as Jolly (2004) points out, 'are exploited by the same system'. This analysis reduces the space for feminist analyses of the position of women vis a vis men. There is no vision of women's liberation beyond classless society; as such, there is no autonomy in women's struggle for freedoms. There are no strong voices of women, no champions of change from within the organization.

☞ *Protectionist and Conservative culture*

The sub-centres of NK are quite non-traditional in that they have men and women not married to each other staying in the same campus for weeks on end⁶. They spend meal-times together and on weekends have schooling and meetings. This kind of proximity is fairly unthinkable in most of rural Bangladesh. The sub-centres are constantly open to the landless group members, and there is no sense of privacy or personal space: "any liaison would immediately become public information," says the Coordinator of NK. "One married woman had an affair with a male colleague: both had to leave. If a woman has friendly relations with a male colleague, this would be gossiped about, might compel her to leave."

In order to survive within a lower-middle class setting in these times of rising fundamentalism, the Sub-centres have to maintain very puritanical and strict codes of sexual morality which reinforces prevailing Bengali notions of sexual conduct. Needless to say these codes are always strictest about women's role. Most women don't mind this because they don't actually have any sexual freedom in the outside world. What it does however is to limit their ideas about freedom. The obliteration of sexual choice then permeates the organizational consciousness to the extent that "*friendships and relationships are never discussed among staff*" (Staff member), and a Central Team woman member declares, "*There are no extra marital affairs here – it is rare in Bengali culture.*" The puritanical mindset even gives rise to the notion that an asexual folk-based alternative musical culture can be built up to "*discourage people from watching obscene ('oshleel') videos*" (Cultural Team).

The sub-centres with women workers have an unwritten dress-code: they must wear the 'shari' for all field work; the more practical and convenient 'shalwar-kameez' is only allowed on campus. Women workers admit, "*Managing the Shari is tough when it rains and I can't run or ride a bicycle. They also take longer to put on and are difficult to maintain.*" Predictably, women can use only rickshaws or walk to commute to the villages where they organize groups⁷. Men on the other hand are free of any dress-code and use motor-cycles or bicycles to get to work. Another perceptive observation by the Training Evaluation consultant reveals that male colleagues are conservative about the colour of clothes worn by widows or single women in their team and may even pass a sneering comment if the colour is not muted enough.

Women cannot go out at night for either meetings or emergencies, certainly not for performances or entertainment, something that men with their greater mobility can easily do. (In fact landless group women actually have greater mobility than the women staff in this regard!) The Central Cultural Team rues the fact that they have no women members, since "*all good plays have female roles*"; however, they aver "*Since our work involves a lot of traveling, we don't have any women on our team, although women's abilities are on par with men.*" The assumption is that women team members would not

⁶ This has been mentioned and valorised by both Kabeer (2003) and Jolly (2004)

⁷ Reference was made, however, to a senior woman staff member who rode a motorcycle to work. She appears to have left NK.

want a traveling lifestyle that would interfere with their deemed roles of social reproduction; further, that there would be social disapproval of women traveling with men. Women with children have to spend time with them after field work, something that men never have to do.

Legitimacy as staff appears to draw heavily from daring and bold actions such as response to incidents of attack, or the late night Committee meetings, which are based on 'male actions.' In two Sub-centres observed, there was a clearly hierarchical male female relationship as there was considerable gap in experience and information between men and women. In one location, the male staff had a know-all authoritative manner and a patronizing attitude to women. In the other, the senior-most male staff had an engaging sense of informality that appeared to break gender barriers, but his authority and leadership were evident.

The conservative nature of male staff is also evinced by some of the Shalish judgments where large numbers of senior male staff have attended. While mediating at a Shalish case of dowry harassment, the Central Cultural Team leader and Divisional Trainer have actually facilitated the 'peaceful solution' that the harassment should be stopped since the girl's father (who is a Chairman of a Union Committee of landless groups) promises that he will give the remaining dowry within two months (14 May 2006, Anchal Monthly Report). The general trend is to send women back to their husband's home at the successful conclusion of such a Shalish.

The Coordinator of NK acknowledges that "*Women workers usually raise better questions and more substantive issues than men in staff gatherings,*" yet women do not get elected to leadership positions. In this regard, the comment of a Central Team woman member is revealing: "*I am willing to do all the work male staff do, even at night – women staff could also overcome their fears, but the men are not letting them. That is why women are unable to come to leadership... Men see women's empowerment as a challenge to their masculine prestige: they wish to 'grant permission to women' to move ahead. Male NK workers have not changed their outlook at all; (capable) women challenge men staff and get into conflicts because of this. Men want to be sympathetic and helpful and supportive to women, but not to transform relations between men and women. So the differences remain.*"

Her insights reveal a deeper gender politics within the organization where the male workers may possibly be threatened by women's greater workload, larger numbers of landless women's groups and perhaps the sharper observations by women colleagues. The restrictions on women's mobility and the protectionist stance that prevent women from taking on the crucial responsibilities of night meetings with male groups or management of emergency situations, also act as the barriers to women attaining the coveted leadership posts of Anchal or Divisional President.

These are anomalies in a woman-led, women-centred organization which intends to impact on gender relations, and need serious reflection.

CHAPTER Four: Gender Relations analysis in Nijera Kori

'Women will be able to establish their right to question and determine their choices. They will be able to see themselves as human beings and able to establish their humanity'.

This chapter discusses the place and function of gender analysis in the work undertaken by Nijera Kori. The questions that we ask are a. what the overall shared vision for gender transformatory change is, and, b. how gender analysis informs the work undertaken. A related question is how gender transformatory change fits into the overarching models of social change that Nijera Kori works with.

Revisiting the Collective Capability building agenda

As discussed in Chapter One, this gender impact assessment has used some of the key conceptual tools developed by Kabeer in her paper (2003) 'Making rights work for the poor: Nijera Kori and the construction of "collective capabilities" in rural Bangladesh'. Kabeer's discussion of the change model informing the work of NK applies Sen's human capabilities framework to analyse the NK approach. Human capabilities refers to the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of "being and doing". NK represents one of those organisations in Bangladesh that has defined its agenda from its inception in terms of building the **collective capabilities** of poor women and men to claim their rights as citizens. According to Kabeer concepts of power and empowerment are thus central to NK's understanding of itself as an organisation for social transformation.

Empowerment in the human capabilities framework refers to processes of change by which those who have been denied the capacity to make choices become enabled to do so. In order to gain in power people need access to resources (economic, human, social and relational) to make real choices which means to be able choose between alternatives. Access to resources is provided and constrained by institutions of family, community, state and markets which define what a person is entitled to according to their social positions whether these be their class, gender, ethnicity or others. Thus gaining access to institutions becomes a key issue in struggles for empowerment. A second and related aspect of power is agency i.e. the ability to define and act on one's goals. Kabeer explains that resources and agency together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as "capabilities", the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of "being and doing" (Sen 1992: 40). She explains further that because empowerment has to be seen as an on-going process of "becoming empowered", it is difficult to predict an "end-state" to the process. Achievements in agency (or the ability to act) at a particular moment in time constitutes the baseline for how a person will exercise agency in the future. Thus the critical question to ask when measuring "achievements" is whether the particular set of achievements has transformatory potential: do they open up new possibilities for action or do they shut out existing ones?

Whereas NK's agenda is to build collective capabilities of the poor, critical questions remain. Does acquired collective capabilities to bargain, negotiate, protest and act on the condition and position that individuals and collectives find themselves in because they are poor, assetless, working class and less powerful automatically translate into capabilities that allow for women, a subordinated gender, to achieve valued ways of 'being' and 'doing' i.e. to be empowered, to make choices, to aspire for an identity beyond that which prevalent social relations and gender ideologies allow them etc.?

The evidence from the previous chapters would suggest that this is not so. The previous chapters [as also the work of Kabeer (2003) and Jolly (2004)] have detailed the many gains for poor women and the work done on gender issues by both women and men. At the same time the previous chapters also point to the many difficulties in sustaining

changes in gender relations, entrenching new and transformed models of gender relations based on equality within society, and giving women and men who are associated for many years with the NK a new vision of social change and gender relations. To a great extent there is an impasse in the work on gender issues in that most of the work is on the social problems that affect women rather than on the analysis and questioning of the systematic causes that give rise to gender inequality and injustice. In what follows we take a closer look at the nature of the impasse, the aspirations voiced by different groups, both staff and community, about changed gender relations. This will be followed by an analysis of the possible causes of the impasse.

The impasse

A senior member of the central team summarised the impasse that the work on gender issues has got into. Whereas NK groups mobilise against and launch movements on several gender issues ranging from dowry, 'talak', rape and violence against women, this is more often in reaction to incidents than as part of a proactive political programme. *'We have had so many movements but always in reaction to something. We have not had a well-thought out strategy on any women's issues'*. As a result gender issues do not give rise to social and political demands. *'As an organization we can raise questions but cannot change society: if we raise gender issues only within our groups, will they really emerge as a social and political demand?'* Women's issues are social problems needing reform. They do not have a political dimension requiring political action at all institutional levels. Another central team member observed that *'the analysis of social issues does not always extend to women's issues: women's issues are seen as social aberrations needing reformative action'*.

The reasons for the lack of pro-activeness arise from the lack of gender analysis and an understanding of how gender analysis relates to wider social and political analysis. *'We have far less analysis and understanding of women's issues that we have of economic and political issues...'* As for example, NK does not have an analysis of why younger women are increasingly donning the 'burqa', and why the message of the fundamentalists about appropriate female behaviour and dress have found a resonance among younger women from poorer families. *'We need to further analyze the impact of rising fundamentalisms and globalization on gender relations as seen in the lived experience of women, at a practical level not on a theoretical level – have we understood why young women are opting for the burqa? Is it a gentrification – middle-classness?'*

The question of culture and what is appropriate 'culture' that an organisation like NK should promote remains a vexed one. The objective of the cultural team is to give working class people the opportunity to create cultural programmes that reflect their experiences and creativity. It is also to combat 'oshlil' or vulgar culture being promoted on television and through other media programmes. However, as with other activities of NK there is a singular lack of gender analysis and the result is that they rely on formulaic messages on women's issues. *'The Cultural Team have well-thought out pro-active messages on some issues but not on women's issues (mobility, education, dowry violence, decision-making etc) – it is too formulaic – women are twice oppressed etc'*. The 'culture' question has not progressed in NK beyond the classic 'base and superstructure' debate of the Marxists. The rise of religious fundamentalism and peoples' acquiescence to religious authorities remains unexplained beyond the term 'kusanskar' which refers to superstition and traditionalism. It becomes a form of 'false consciousness' from which the working class can be rescued once they understand that it is false consciousness.

The ability to relate the private experiences of gender to the public world of work and especially to NK as an organisation is poorly developed and remains unexplored especially at the sub centre level where most workers live and work. This is a classic case of the lack of gender analysis and gender awareness in the organisation. *'At sub-centre and group meeting level we do not discuss male privilege, only women's oppression. We*

discuss this somewhat more at Staff Council level but the lack of space or confidence to raise such issues remains; it would raise uncomfortable intra-team and intra-family questions – we are unable to question ourselves.’ The inability to link women’s private experience of subordination with the public role of women has resulted in a strategic impasse. As a senior member of the central team explained to us, *‘If we continuously ignore the personal dimensions of subordination, how do we hope to address larger social inequality? Do we expect women to join in larger social struggles before they can take action in their personal lives? Our concern was for personal empowerment along with collective change/consciousness raising’.*

As a result of this inability all problems are externalised – patriarchy, capitalism, fundamentalists and other enemies are responsible for women’s oppression. There is little understanding of the reproductive role of women and how this affects their role in public life. Because this analysis is not made women staff members, for example, were found to be apologetic that left the organization because of their responsibility for child bearing and rearing and looking after families. Male gender norms of work made women feel inadequate and on the defensive.

The lack of a vision of equal and just gender relations is reflected in the judgments and accommodations arrived at the ‘shalish’ (as reported to us). In the earlier chapter mention has been made of women’s growing involvement as jurors in shalish. This was unthinkable before in most areas. This has been interpreted as being progressive and bringing about a change in women’s position. However, the mere presence of women does not really alter that much the kind of decisions that are being taken if we analyse these decisions from the perspective of new and transformed gender relations. At the meeting of the Hossainnagar Bhumihin Mahila Samity (Pairabon SC) the women related a shalish that they had undertaken. This involved the daughter of one of the leading and oldest members of the Samity. Her husband ill-treated her for several years, abandoned her and the son, and remarried. What was the ‘judgment’ arrived at and enforced? The man was forced to take her back. However, it is she who now has to live in two places because the compromise they reached is that he will visit her here and she will go and stay with him for extended periods of time. However, the son remains with the grandmother and the father bears no responsibility for him. This compromise/ arrangement/ judgment was seen by the women as a great victory for the women’s groups. They had put an end to ‘talak’ (wife repudiation). The solution for the woman whose life has been ruined by marriage and her husband was to return to the marriage. Marriage symbolised the ultimate career of women and these actions/ judgments reinforce the notion that there is no other justice for women except to be reinstated in this position. A divorced woman is a disgrace and somebody to be shunned.

The men’s groups in Pairabon SC related a shalish that they had undertaken. An adivasi woman was raped by a man from the majority community (read landed and powerful) and fell pregnant. The Union Parishad Chairman had refused to act. The NK committees set up their own shalish. The man was found guilty and fined 35,000 Taka. The money was collected and given to the woman. The group related that ‘Cheleta ke mardhor kora hoyeche ar jutha petano hoyeche’ (the man was beaten up and beaten with shoes)!! Jutha petano (or beating with shoes) signifies humiliation. The existence of NK groups gives ordinary and often poor people the power to protest and act against wrongs. This shalish is an example of how this happens. And without these citizen groups the kind of wrongs that this case sought to redress would not happen because the wronged person is, by virtue of being a member of a tribal community, of lower status and can be disregarded. But one cannot help wondering whether imposing a fine is an adequate punishment for rape and violence and whether the case for gender justice has been made. Rape is a crime and it is a crime of sexual violence. It is regularly used as a means of intimidation and to establish power and superiority over the ‘other’, the other who is conceived of as inferior. In this instance male power is established over a woman but that is not all. The symbolic and material power of propertied men of majority

communities in South Asia as a whole and in Bangladesh in this instance is established by their sexual domination of women of minority and subaltern communities. Without a transformed vision of gender justice the committees relied on 'commonsense' which generally means a kind of pragmatism that in most cases reinforces prevailing ideas about how women and men should be treated. Taken on its own the shalish is commendable. A local institution dispensing patriarchal judgments has been turned on its head and made to recognise that an adivasi woman has to be compensated for rape. But the 'shalish' is not a stand alone – it is being performed by members of committees and an organisation that struggles for justice for the poor. What if any are the consequences for the organisation in its treatment of rape and violence against women?

Aspirations and alternative visions

Asked what changed vision of gender relations and society should inform the work of Nijera Kori, respondents at different layers of the organisation gave their visions of a gender just society that went beyond the formulaic. However, they had more difficulty in articulating/ imagining what could change the situation.

A major aspiration expressed by members of the central team was that women realise their potential to make choices and not be constrained all the time by societal expectations of their roles, behaviour, and position. 'Women will be able to establish their right to question and determine their choices. They will be able to see themselves as human beings and able to establish their humanity'.

Women's groups were unequivocal in their aspiration for freedom – freedom to define the terms on which women and men will relate, freedom from the obligation to be married and so forth and so on. 'Our dream is to have fewer children, for higher education, up to graduation or at least school-leaving. We will educate our daughters and send them for jobs – there should be no dowry' (Thana Haat SC Area). 'We want girls to marry later, to be more educated, have a better environment. We want them to have mobility and jobs. They should not have to worry about getting married' (Bhater Tek SC area). 'We want our daughters to have education, jobs, independence, and to live their own lives, with marriage not being mandatory' (Tangail SC area).

The aspirations for more freedom was not only limited to what women wanted for their daughters. It extended to daughters-in-law. 'We want to treat our daughters-in-law like our daughters, we want to be their friends' (Thana Haat SC Area). 'We want daughters-in-law to be like our daughters, not have conflicts with them, and for them to have fewer pregnancies' (Bhater Tek SC area).

How was this freedom to be obtained? Women's groups interviewed struggled to formulate a vision of transformative action and in the process repeated many of the ways and means that make up development speak and social reform. 'Maybe if all women are educated they will get all their rights – they will know what is right and wrong' was an oft repeated refrain. There is a duality in this approach. On the one hand it reflects what poor and often illiterate women are always told by social reformers/ development organisations/ politicians i.e. they need to be educated and reformed and then they will understand. On the other hand, education and knowledge is an aspiration, a goal which in their lives has been unreachable.

'Maybe if we get a socialist society where there is not so much private property, there will be equality and everything will change for women – we learnt this at the training', said a number of groups interviewed. An innate sensitivity to questions of power and the importance of being in charge was conveyed in the aspiration that 'Maybe if women became lawyers and judges there would be peace' but with a pragmatic note 'but then they may also take bribes!' (Bhater Tek SC area)

Why the impasse?

- a. **The dogmatic approach to class analysis prevents analysis per se.** A key problem NK faces is not dissimilar to the problem faced by most NGOs in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The problem is that solutions are offered prior to an analysis of the situation, either as programmes (e.g. micro credit is the answer to poverty) or as the ideological framework for training and organising (e.g. working class as the vanguard of the socialist revolution and society). As a result, and in the case of NK, all analysis has to fit into the solution being offered irrespective of whether reality contradicts dogma. 'In a socialist society where there is not so much private property, there will be equality and everything will change for women' repeated like a mantra by staff and samity members alike simply stops all discussion.
- b. **The overarching model of social change does not accommodate gender analysis.** As mentioned above, class analysis is the central ideological framework for seeing the world and analysing society. This in itself is not a bad thing since the philosophical basis of class analysis, materialism, lends itself more readily to the analysis of divisions of labour and resources by class and gender. It provides a more rigorous conceptual framework than neo-liberalism or wishy-washy developmentalism. However, exponents of class analysis worldwide have been very averse to using the tools of historical materialism to analyse gender relations until socialist feminists joined issue with them and created the analytical and strategic tools to make this possible. Feminist perspectives on materialism have not, however, entered the analytical and training models pursued by NK. There is a certain hesitance to allow this to happen as is evident in the oft repeated refrain 'NK believes that male/female relations need not be inherently antagonistic and that men can become women's allies in the struggle against patriarchal oppression' which is echoed in the organisational reports, by external evaluators/ reviewers and by staff themselves without a reality check.
- c. **Commonsense and pragmatism in place of gender analysis** reproduces prevailing gender cultures. The samitees and the staff model their ideas about justice, particularly gender justice, on what they already know about the role and position of women and men in society. Thus justice for a woman ill-treated by her husband is to force him to take her back; if a marriage cannot take place because of extortionist dowry demands then the samitees raise the money to pay; if men don't use contraception then women have to and so forth and so on. Underlying these and similar actions to redress gender injustice is a certain pragmatism and Gramscian commonsense about what works and does not work in society. Pragmatism is not an undesirable trait but when pragmatism and commonsense becomes the only basis for decisions regarding gender relations, the result is a reproduction of those very norms and culture of gender relations that keep women subordinated and prevents change. It forecloses the possibility a critical consciousness emerging and challenging the existing situation
- d. **The lack of a vision of transformed gender relations in NK** constrains action and the growth of critical consciousness. The samity members and staff rely excessively on pragmatic solutions and formulas when talking about and acting on gender issues because there is not a shared vision of gender equality and gender transformatory change. The visions of gender equality are very difficult to investigate in interviews because, as has been mentioned in Chapter One, ideas about gender relations are deeply internalised and because when questioned people generally respond in politically correct terms because their ideas are not shaped by exposure to reflection and challenge. Re-visioning gender relations would entail seeing the woman's question as autonomous and not necessarily resolved through class based struggles. It would also mean seeing women as autonomous beings whose social, political and sexual emancipation are issues

requiring attention irrespective of whether it contributes to overall struggles against oppression. Such a radical vision of transformation and of gender equality would be very difficult for most people in the organisation to accept, both women and men. It is much more difficult to accept than the NK overall vision which is also radical: 'to establish an exploitation-free society by changing the present system of social exploitation with the aim of emancipation of working class people' (Nijera Kori 1999).

- e. **Capacity building does not incorporate gender analysis.** Training and other capacity building strategies are the main instruments that NK has to build human capabilities among staff and samity members. And yet, as discussed in Chapter Three, neither the staff training nor that given to members of the landless groups incorporates a gender analysis. The discussion on gender issues is still limited to the nineteenth century writings of Engels. Very few staff members have been through the gender training provided by the consultant. The conceptual tools to analyse gender relations – gender division of labour and distribution of resources – does not find a place in the training framework. In fact capacity building activities and training per se is very impoverished. The teaching curriculum is arcane, the pedagogical methods are unreflective and the content is poor.

CHAPTER FIVE: Recommendations

In discussing the framework for this gender assessment in Chapter One, two points were made that we wish to bring back in discussing the recommendations. First, since NK does not provide services or development inputs, the principal means available to NK to build collective capabilities are what Kabeer terms as 'intangible' resources i.e. mobilization, organization, knowledge and training, and solidarity. Second, because NK relies mainly on 'intangible resources' human beings are both a means and the end of the development approach pursued by NK. Thus the impact assessment investigated how intangible resource inputs promote gender transformatory change by raising consciousness about gender inequality and empowering women, and men too, to act against all forms of gender injustice in the public world of politics, the economy and institutions of state, markets and community and private spheres of family, kinship and intimate relations. These achievements (values ways of being and doing) were investigated for both the landless organization members and for the NK staff since the latter provide the 'intangible' resources through their interaction with the landless groups. The main issue in framing recommendations (based on our analysis) is how NK can build a gender aware / sensitive, knowledgeable and analytical work force and samity membership.

Since NK relies on the ability of human beings to affect social change the recommendations focus on those levels and areas that equip people, especially staff, to bring about gender aware change.

- **Develop an organization wide vision of gender transformatory change**

As has been pointed out in the previous chapters, an important lacuna in NK is the lack of a vision of gender transformatory change. It is for this reason that there is a tendency to look for 'solutions' to women's oppression by responding to incidents (dowry, 'talak', rape and violence against women). The organization lacks a sustained change strategy based on the analysis and questioning of the systematic causes that give rise to gender inequality and injustice.

Another problem of not having a widely shared vision of gender transformatory change is that both staff and samitee members rely excessively on pragmatic solutions and formulas when talking about and acting on gender issues. The result is a reproduction of those very norms and culture of gender relations that keep women subordinated and prevents change. It forecloses the possibility of a critical consciousness emerging and challenging the existing situation.

A vision for change in gender relations has to be transformatory in content because otherwise the present situation would continue in that despite NK's commitment to fighting women's oppression and many movements and actions against oppressions, men and women of the samitees do not have a clear perspective on change and their actions are unreflective and reactive to situations. A vision of transformatory change in gender relations would encompass all areas of social and institutional life that produce the subordination of women and the superordination of men. Re-visioning gender relations would entail seeing the women's question as autonomous and not necessarily resolved through class based struggles. It would also mean seeing women as autonomous beings whose social, political and sexual emancipation are issues requiring attention irrespective of whether it contributes to overall struggles against oppression.

This re-visioning of gender transformatory change would only make sense if undertaken collectively through processes of consultations, discussions and debates throughout the organisation. As has been mentioned in the last chapter, despite the fact that NK has overall a radical vision of social change, a vision of gender transformatory change of the kind that is being recommended would be very difficult for most people because gender

is part of each and everyone's identity and as such ideas about gender relations are deeply ingrained. A consultative process would promote

- ownership of the vision
 - understanding of the proposed change and reflection
 - commitment to a new perspective on equality
- **Undertake a Gender and organizational change analysis, diagnosis and formulate an action plan**

One of the points for investigation mentioned in the Terms of Reference for this gender impact assessment was 'the extent to which gender issues are reflected in the values and principles; and internal cultures, processes, structures, procedures, systems (*including management*) and internal practices'. Chapter Three and partly Chapter Four provides some insights. We have shown that there exists a clear commitment to gender equality. Many of the procedures for recruitment, retention, election and training have taken special account of women workers needs. Strict rules are in place against sexual harassment and they are enforced. Many women workers reported to us that their work life is liberating and that living and working with colleagues at the sub centre is a rewarding experience.

However, gender inequality persists in the organisation as evidenced by the poor retention rate for women workers; a wholly male Central Cultural team; the absence of women staff in several centres and very few women who have come into leadership positions without special reservations. Furthermore many aspects of the organisational culture, practice and pedagogical approaches were found to be inimical to the promotion of gender equality in the organisation. The sub centres, where most workers live and work, are crucibles for the production and reproduction of gender norms which negatively affect the retention of women workers; discourage learning on gender theory and practice; and norm male staff members as the selfless and authentic workers of NK.

For these reasons NK needs to undertake a well facilitated gender and organisational change analysis that will take a more detailed look at the different dimensions of the organisation. There are several frameworks and methods for undertaking a gender and organisational analysis. The common elements are that they focus attention on three layers of the organisation – the technical, political and cultural – each of which are viewed from other additional cross-cutting organisational dimensions mainly the mission/mandate, structure and human resources.⁸ The organisational analysis should lead to a diagnosis of the constraints and opportunities to promote gender aware change in the organisation. Based on this diagnosis a strategy and action plan can be made that concretely describes how change processes will be undertaken.

As has been recommended for the formulation the vision for gender transformatory change, such an exercise needs to be undertaken in a participatory and transparent manner involving different levels of staff in the analysis, diagnosis and action planning. This will promote understanding and ownership of a process which otherwise can seem threatening. However, it is key that there is good facilitation and that facilitators are trained in gender and organisational change methodologies. Furthermore, it is extremely important that a team from within the organisation, whose members are given prior training in gender and organisational development methods, are given responsibility to lead the process. In undertaking the diagnosis and action plan care should be taken to refer back to the organizational vision of gender transformatory change.

⁸ Chapter 1 of Mukhopadhyay, M (et al) Politics of the Possible: Gender mainstreaming and organizational change reviews different frameworks for analysis. The book reviews the experiences of NGOs in south Asia in promoting gender equality through organizational change.

▪ **Overhaul the training and capacity building programmes**

Training and other capacity building strategies are the main instruments that NK has to build human capabilities among staff and samity members. NK indeed has several training programmes for both staff and samity members. Additionally the staff members have schooling sessions at the sub centre level. However, the pedagogical culture is inimical to analysis and questioning. It draws heavily on socialist dogma and conflates gender equality with the class struggle. Gender analysis does not form part of the curriculum of the training programmes. Moreover, the training methods and content is resulting in the disturbing trend towards formulaic thinking and responses. The very culture of debate is undermined as a result and it is difficult to have a discussion on gender equality.

NK has commissioned a separate review of the training programmes which will provide a deeper analysis of the training programmes and suggest how to improve the quality and delivery. The main recommendation of this review is to overhaul the training programmes with a focus on the following:

- Devise new curriculum for the training programmes and include gender analysis as a central part of the content
- Upgrade the materials and literature available at the sub centres and include more relevant and up to date materials on gender and women's movements
- Prepare materials based on NK experiences and adapt materials (handbooks, guides) already available and in use.
- Improve the training methods by encouraging action reflection. In order to do this it is necessary to organise a series of training of trainers to prepare trainers. The present training models, methods and trainers are clearly unable to deliver on analytical, relevant and strategic training.

▪ **Institute a gender infrastructure**

In order to mainstream gender in the organisation, it also necessary to build focus on gender issues. Experiences with gender mainstreaming world wide demonstrates the need for an intra-organisational mechanism that functions as the body responsible for building focus and keeping the pressure on the organisation to implement commitments to gender equality. These organisational mechanisms have variously been known as women's committees, gender and development unit/ team etc. depending on the nature of the organisation and the functions given to the units/teams. The purpose is for such a body to act as the gender infrastructure. NK needs to build a gender infrastructure to support the change process in the organisation because otherwise the intention to mainstream gender issues does not get actualised and in fact gets subordinated to the core business of the organisation.

However, the experience of the gender infrastructure in organisations has not always been very successful and NK needs to take note of why this is so. This failure is more noticeable within government and multilateral agencies. Studies have shown that gender infrastructure in government and multilateral agencies is most often starved of resources and isolated from the arena of political decision-making within organisations and, therefore, has had little influence on policy making (Goetz 2003). While there is less information on the situation in non-governmental organisations, what little exists seems to corroborate the relative powerlessness of women's committees to affect change internally or in programmes, or to support women workers in organisations (Goetz 2001). A recent study (see M. Mukhopadhyay et al 2006) shows on the other hand that the gender infrastructure does play a critical role in the gender mainstreaming and organisational change process provided they are supported by the leadership of the organisation, given a clear role and located sufficiently high up in the hierarchy of the organisation. Most importantly the gender infrastructure should not be reduced to the

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role of becoming the sole implementers of the gender and organisational change strategy.

Annex 1

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Annex 2**Schedule of Consultants (24 June – 6 July 07)
with list of sites and respondents**

| Date | Site | Respondents |
|---------|-----------------------------|---|
| 27 June | Dhaka NK office | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Interview with entire Central team☞ Interview with Hasina, Meena Sarkar and Siddique |
| 28 June | Dhaka NK Office | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Interviews with Rose and Khushi Kabir☞ Meeting Naila Kabir |
| 30 June | Noakhali | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Travel from Dhaka (6 am) to Char Jabbar Sub Centre☞ Field visit to Bogga Polder village for group meeting (first all, then women members only)☞ Group discussion with all staff of Char Jabbar Sub-centre (as well as Division Chairperson and Anchal Chairperson), then male staff, then female staff |
| 1 July | Noakhali | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Review discussion with all staff (8.30am)☞ Travel to Nobogram Char for group meeting (first all, then women members only)☞ Group discussion with all-male staff at Thanar Haat Subcentre☞ Travel to Bhatar Tek Subcentre☞ Meeting with group members (first all, then women members only)☞ Interview with woman leader of Sub-centre and Training Cell member☞ Travel to Chandina |
| 2 July | Tangail, (Dhaka night halt) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Interview with woman Co-Organiser of Chottogram division☞ Travel to Aitbarpur village for meeting with women group members and leaders, followed by short interaction with male group members☞ Interview with male Division Trainer☞ Travel back to Dhaka and discussion with Rose en route |
| 3 July | Dhaka NK Office | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Interview with Rasheda (Central Training Team) and Mohiuddin (Central Organiser)☞ Briefing with Rose about administrative data☞ Lunch with Khushi Kabir |
| 5 July | Tangail | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Travel to Tangail, then at Gala village for meeting with women group members and leaders, followed by short interaction with male group members☞ Group discussion with Central Cultural Team members at Tangail |

Annexure 3**Interview Guide with Staff and FGD Guide with landless groups**

1. Interview with staff

The interview guide for staff interviews included the following questions:

- i. What are the existing gender power relations? In rural Bangladesh among women and men of the particular class/ region? Gender- specific role-division? Role of religion and fundamentalists in delineating what is 'suitable'?
- ii. What sort of change would you like to see in the sphere of gender relations? Personal, social or policy level?
- iii. Spheres of 'gender intervention' – concrete examples of what has actually changed in personal lives; what has changed in the larger sphere of gender relations?
- iv. Where has change not really occurred so far? Why is this so?
- v. How does the analysis of gender relations arise? What sorts of questions are raised and which questions do not usually arise?
- vi. What are the standards set for equal treatment of women and men? How are these standards/norms set? Are they challenged, for example regarding location, timings, division of work and privileges, protectionism of women, women's mobility and their behaviour, dress and relationships, especially with other sex? What gender differences are maintained in professional or domestic responsibilities, childcare, work evaluation, importance given to staff problems?
- vii. Why are there not enough women in this organization? Why are there few women in leadership? What are the barriers?
- viii. What sorts of changes are required to change this situation? What support and strengthening would you need to participate in that change?

2. FGD guide with Landless group members

- i. What are the existing gender power relations? In rural Bangladesh among women and men of the particular class/ region? Gender- specific role-division?
- ii. Spheres of 'gender intervention' – concrete examples of what has actually changed in personal lives; what has changed in the larger sphere of gender relations?
- iii. Where has change not really occurred so far? Why is this so?
- iv. What sort of change would you like to see in the sphere of gender relations? Personal, social or policy level?

ⁱ From the TOR of NK, dated June 2007