

Claiming the right to be heard

Case studies of female members of Nijera Kori



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Introduction

Background

For more than two months I have stayed at Nijera Kori's sub center in Bagatipara during my internship in the fall 2013. There I have lived with the staff and taking part of their daily work with the landless groups. I have gone to 30 group meetings, three workshops and other activities, for example, a two day long foot marsh and "Right to Information" rally. Being able to frequently take part of such a variety of activities and events frequently made it first of all possible to get connected with people and second of all to build closer relationships with some of the group members. I selected five women from five different villages, which I saw on a regular basis during my stay. We had two to three in-depth interviews (that lasted around one to two hours each) beside from seeing each other at group meetings and at other activities that Nijera Kori arranged. Of course it takes longer time than two months to build up a deeper relationship and to genuinely understand another person's situation, but since I met these women regularly I had a chance to know them better. Through their willingness to share their experience to me, I believe that I got a fairly good understanding of their situation.

My own background is in Social Anthropology and Sustainable Development, I have a bachelor degree from Stockholm University, Sweden. Before that, I was studying documentary film making for two years and made two films, one about women's advocacy and organising for their rights at vineyards and fruit farms in South Africa and the other one about a female political activist from the occupied Western Sahara. I have always had a big interest in social movements and women's rights which made this internship greatly rewarding for me. My previous experiences have helped me a lot in doing the in-depth interviews and understanding underlying structures of these women's positions. However it is also important to be aware of my own white, middle-class, western perception of equality, women's rights, freedom, individuality, identity etc. which has influenced how I perceive and interact with others and vice versa. This perception has an impact on what kind of questions that are being asked and what I have focused on illustrating in the case studies.

The biggest challenge in this work has been the linguistic aspect. The fact that I do not speak or understand Bengali (more than a few simple words) has made it difficult to do proper ethnographic in-depth interviews, as well as difficult to conduct a proper anthropological analysis of the interviews. A lot of information has been lost in translation; the way people are talking and the small nuances in how someone is expressing themselves have unfortunately been missed out because of the translation. Those linguistic distinctions that can tell a lot about a person's ideas, thinking and

meaning and in a bigger dimension a reflection of cultural conceptualisation of a society in large, is to some extent missing in my work. However, I have got to know these women considerably well and to the extent that they were comfortable to share a lot of their inner thoughts and feelings to me. The benefit of doing more than one interview and being in field for a longer period of time was that after the first interview, all five women were more relaxed and more adapted to the way my interviews were conducted and therefore we could have a more fruitful conversation every time we met.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is mainly to address to what extent Nijera Kori's work is affecting these women's lives, their livelihood opportunities and their challenges through five case studies of five female group members. The purpose is also to illustrate five different examples of group members of Nijera Kori and to give a glimpse of these women's lives.

The usefulness of case studies is that they provide a real-life context of a phenomenon or an issue: In this case they provide five different examples of Nijera Kori's member's lives and in what way this membership has affected them. This can be helpful to get an insight of group member's life and a better understanding of the impact of Nijera Kori's work.

Disposition

This paper is divided in three parts. First section is an introduction to the paper. In the next section the five case studies will be presented one by one. The third section contains a short discussion of the five case studies.

Acknowledgement

I am very grateful for all the time Shukla, Nishad, Mira, Rashida and Ishita* have spent with me, sharing their thoughts and feelings and allowing me to write about their lives. I would also like to thank the staff at Bagatipara sub center that have so warmly welcomed me into their lives and shared their thoughts, opinions and helped me get in contact with so many group members. Most important, they gave me a deep understanding of Nijera Kori's work that I could not have got from a theoretical perspective.

To Nijera Kori and The Swallows India Bangladesh, I greatly appreciate the opportunity they gave me to do this internship and to have this memorable learning experience.

* All names in this paper are anonymised

“After joining, I started to exchange my feelings and express my voice”

Mira is 39 years old, living with her husband, daughter, son and daughter-in-law on a small land where three neat brick houses containing one room each, stands close to each other and forms a small yard in between the buildings. Mira's husband and son are both farmers but the family doesn't own any land themselves, so they are leasing land from landowners in the village. Sometimes they also lease land collectively with other group members of Nijera Kori. Right now Mira's family are cultivating rice and after the harvest they will grow lentils on the same land. They have one cow that gives them milk that Mira sells by the road close to the nearby market.

Mira has lived in her village since birth, her husband came to stay with her parents. She has a lot of siblings and growing up, her family was very poor, and none of them had the opportunity to have a proper education. Mira herself had to leave school just after just one to two years, to start working at the family's tea stall at the market with her other siblings. “We had to live in hardship during our childhood. There was a lot of discrimination in the household, for example, we, the girls in the family, didn't get proper food and clothes from our parents, they gave all the good things to the boys”.

The notion that this neglecting of the girls in her family was gender discrimination, Mira didn't realise until around six years ago, when she joined Nijera Kori and formed a landless group, which she is the leader of. Through group discussion, workshops and three trainings Mira understood how power structures is an underlying factor of inequality and how these structures affect her own position in the family and also in the society at large. She says that nowadays she has got a good comprehension about her rights, as a woman and a landless marginalised farmer, but that wasn't the case a couple of years ago:

“Before joining Nijera Kori, I just used to stay at home. I didn't have any knowledge about the world, I only spoke to my family members. But after I joined NK and as I started to go out of home I was able to know more about my surroundings and what was happening around me, and I started to react or reply to other people about those things that I saw. In this way I started to exchange my feelings and to express my voice.”

It all started when one of the staff at the Bagatipara office came to Mira's village to set up a group with some women and Mira got very inspired by the programme organiser and interested in their meetings:

“There is another group around here and when they sat for meeting I heard what they were talking and discussing about and I was greatly impressed about their conversation and discussion. They were discussing about child marriage, dowry and also different kinds of allowances from the government, so I got inspired and felt that, if I stick together with them, with that group, I can also have benefits from this kind of work.”

But being connected to the landless organisation and to make resistances to those in power and questioning the existing power structures is not always unproblematic:

“A lot of rich people around here don't like our work or our connection with NK, but in spite of that we're still members because we like NK's work. The rich don't like our work because there are a lot of things that we revolt against. We were not learned from the beginning but we learned a lot after joining the group. The rich don't like the work because it has negative impact on their power.”

The considerable improvements in Mira's life are connected to the training that she has got from Nijera Kori to improve her ability to express herself and communicate with others. To have a voice is an important component of empowerment and to be able to be more active and participative in society. Furthermore, the ability to express herself and also her own and her husband's understanding of women's rights, are strong components of the increased freedom Mira experiences:

“I'm feeling good because I have a voice now and I can express my feelings directly. And I can go anywhere, whenever they call for any sort of program or workshop. Joining the group increased my ability to move freely. Before I was not allowed to move freely or go out of home. Now I can move freely to the market to buy things or to go to the different offices, like Upazila office, and talk to people there.”

The freedom to move and the confidence in speaking to officials have made Mira able to take part of a social change in her community and demand rights to governmental benefits for her and other marginalised people:

“Sometimes I go to the nearby hospital and as you know in this country, usually the poor people don't get the medicines that the government allows for them and I also protest against this. Sometimes I go to the Thana office, and just complain of that sort of injustice for the poor people. I also look around in my community, who are entitled to have VGF (vulnerable group feeding) cards or other types of allowances, like having blankets during winter... I search out people who are eligible to have that type

of help.”

But being a landless woman, challenging gender and class structures isn't done without facing problems from the surroundings. When Mira tries to demand her and other vulnerable people's rights to governmental support programmes, the local administration opposes her demands in different ways:

“Sometimes they say to me that, you are talking too much. We will give the people whom you talked about help, but you will not get that thing. Then I say to them that; OK, you don't have to give me, just give those things to those that I have talked about. Somehow I can arrange for myself those things, but those who are needier, they need to be selected first. I feel that they are trying to punish me in this way because I help people to have their rights. Sometimes I feel sad and sometimes I feel angry about these things but what can I do? These people are very powerful.”

There are also people in Mira's village that put pressure on her to stop organise protests about injustices. They threaten her by saying that she will be removed from the village if she raises her voice against some issues. The land that Mira's family lives on have been bought from the village head a long time ago but they did not get any legal registration of the purchase so Mira always fears that they can be removed if they are not on good terms with the village head and the surrounding people.

Mira's ability to move more freely is a lot better than before she joined NK, but she is not satisfied since she is still facing restrictions from the surroundings. Sometimes when she goes out of home, others start questioning her, why and where she's going. She feels that her freedom is not complete yet: “I need more freedom so that I can move freely and that nobody can put obstacle or any question during my movement.”

The negative reactions Mira faces for challenging the existing structures is in one way helped by the support she gets from people close to her, people that are in the same situation as her. Through training and workshops she has met a lot of people and got a bigger social network:

“I have met people that are like me, needy and poor but from different villages, or different Thanas or even different Upazilas. I have gone to Bogra twice for training and I have met a lot of people there. We have talked and shared a lot of things with each other. So before going home, we exchanged phone numbers and we are still in contact. We talk about all the topics around our lives, family and villages, in this way we just want to unload our burden of mind. Because we need to share with

someone. If I didn't have that opportunity to go there I would not have been able to meet these women in there.”

The trainings didn't just give Mira more confidence and a voice of her own. Her social network was improved and she has made a lot of new friends that have made a considerable difference in her life. She also got the experience to travel, to go outside the area where she was born and to see more of her own country.

For Mira it has been very important to give her children a better start in life than she had. She believes that the discrimination of women starts early in the family and she didn't want to repeat the discrimination she had to face in her own household. Therefore, she wanted to give her daughter and son equal rights. Since she didn't get proper education and faces a lot of difficulties by being illiterate, it was important for her to do her best to educate both her children.

“We are a bit of a democratic family, whatever we do we take a family meeting and take decisions by ourselves because I don't want any types of discrimination or deprivation in my family life. I have faced a lot of discrimination in my life and during my childhood and I don't want to repeat that in my household.”

They started to discuss family matters with the children when they were in 6th to 7th standard. Mira says it's a way of coping with the scarcity of money and still has a functioning family life together:

”We sit for a meeting and tell the other family members that we have this amount of money and we can spend it in this and this way, we can buy the most necessary things for every one and we don't need to quarrel or have unrest among us.”

Mira feels that after joining NK, she has been able to do a lot of changes in her life, not only in her family but also to others. She feels really good about the fact that she now has the ability to react to the injustices she experiences in her community.

“Nijera Kori makes a change of your own life, by yourself”

Rashida, a 26 years old woman has been a group leader and a member of Nijera Kori for just over a year. One of the staff from the sub-center came to her family's tea stall and started talking to her about Nijera Koris work and after a couple of meetings Rashida decided to form a group in her village.

The tea stall is in a part of one of the family's houses, there is one big brick house where her brother with family and her parents live and a smaller brick house across a yard filled with rosebushes, where Rashida lives with her fourteen year old daughter. Her husband left them around seven years ago, going abroad for migration work and never returned, and Rashida moved back to her parents' house. She doesn't want to be remarried, her daughter is her everything.

Before Rashida joined NK, her life, as she expresses it: “was just in silence, a silence state. I was never allowed to express my mind so my mouth was almost shut”. She was only around ten to eleven years old when she was married off. She pleaded to people around her to talk to her parents and make them stop the marriage but her parents didn't change their minds.

“I never had my freedom. I was so childish, I couldn't cook and didn't know much about marriage life so I had to suffer a lot of torture in the in-law's house. I had no proper education and I had low confidence about myself and that I could express or do things. So I'm thinking, if I would have had a proper education, my life wouldn't have been like this.”

But since Rashida joined Nijera Kori, her confidence and her ability to express herself has increased, which have led to a greater freedom for her:

“I have learned a lot that have increased my capacity and my self-esteem. My lifestyle has changed completely because now I have freedom and power and I know that I can go to the market and buy things by myself or even go to Dhaka or Rajshahi by myself. Now I know how to raise my voice against things that are unjust and discriminating.”

Rashida says Nijera Kori has made her realise that everyone can make a progress in life, not only well educated people can improve their knowledge and capacity. Through training with Nijera Kori, landless, poor people can empower themselves by self-development. Rashida expresses that she is feeling benefited through NK, that she gets an important support from the staff and the organisation. “The staffs give me courage and support every time I need it.”

Nijera Kori has also had a positive affect on her family. Her mother joined just a couple of months after her, and has also been to training. Her father is not a member but he has got some connections with NK and has also learned about women's rights. During Rashida's childhood, her father never allowed her to go, for example to the market, but things have changed. He doesn't put any obstacle on her freedom to move any more, she can go wherever she wishes.

To be a group leader is not always an easy task. Rashida struggles to select members to training, which is one of the responsibilities of a group leader. "In this session, (the latest training course in Bogra) I picked someone from the group and wanted to send her but the woman's family didn't allow that. They just asked me, what are the benefits of such trainings? The families are always concerned about the monetary gain and a lot of women live in very captivated surroundings".

Rashida describes that it is hard to motivate the members to go since they and their families can't fully grasp what can be achieved from training. For Rashida herself, the three trainings she has undertaken have been a big part of her progress and she tries to explain this to other members. She emphasises that the change she's been able to do in her life is because of her own experience that she got from the different trainings, and that other group member should also go to have the same experience as her.

Still, the other members hesitate to go to training. Some of them even say that they will quit the group if they have to go to training. Rashida considers the lack of monetary gain is a big factor for the low motivation of the members and their families, that improving skills that are not directly connected to an economic gain is seen as unnecessary. "My own power is my biggest power. I try to make people understand that NK makes a change to your own life by yourself. But I fail every time".

Another reason for not going to training, is according to Rashida, that sometimes the family believes that if the wife goes away for a couple of days, that will have a negative effect on the woman's relationship with her husband or the in-laws. They believe that if a woman is away for that long from her family, who will take care of the children, cook, clean, wash, rear the family's cows, goats or chickens? It is still not that common for women in poor households to leave their homes for "just" the matter of their own personal gaining. That is why there is still reluctance towards sending women away from the household for a longer period.

Rashida has been a very active member since she started just a year ago. She visits a lot of other groups and has helped a group that have been on the verge of breaking up. She tries to motivate people to stay in the group by explaining what they can gain if they are organised. They can gain both financially, by collective saving and farming and also mentally, by the support from the group and the organisation.

One group Rashida tried to organise was a group of 30 college male students in a village Nijera Kori is active in. They became very interested in being a member of NK but as they came from different villages the criteria for forming a group could not be fulfilled, since the landless groups are based on village belonging. Rashida's intention to organise student from this college was a strategic act from her side since she felt that the students might be adverse towards NK's work in the area and interfering her work there. Hence, she wanted them to be allied with the organisation by making them join. Although they could not be a registered group, the achievement of organising these students was a very positive experience for Rashida: "This just added an extra power to my confidence that I could organise them, since they are educated and I'm not".

A lot of people that Rashida have talked to are addressing the need of monetary help in any way. One group of women she tried to organise was asking for some handicraft or other work in the area for them. "They were saying that they wanted earn by their own labour. They were saying that, since I'm alone, I can do whatever I feel like, I can make decision of my own. But they are not so free because they have husbands and families, so if they have some sort of work they can contribute to their families and by this, change their lives."

Over all, Rashida expresses that she feels very grateful for the help and the support she has got from NK and that she made a huge change in her life because of that. She is now a very active and supportive of NK's work, she has a new freedom because of her increased confidence. She dares to talk to all kinds of people and is not afraid of raising her voice against injustices.

“The training gave me a lot of courage, it has giving me a lot that have change my way of life”

Ishita lives with her husband and one of her two sons in a clay house with a tin roof and a large yard with some fruit trees and vegetables. She's 35 years old and been a member of Nijera Kori for almost 20 years, and the group leader of one of the groups in the village.

When Ishita was only six years old her father passed away and the family moved back to her mother's family. She was first raised by her grandmother who was the head of the family since her grandfather was mentally ill, and later on her uncles took over the responsibility for her until she was fifteen. Then the family took the decision to marry her off and she had to drop out of school at 8th standard. Her husband was a daily labourer, working in the field, just earning 60 taka so there was a lot of hardship in the family since they just had one income and they were very poor. Ishita has never been working outside of home, although before she had a problem with her arm and elbow, she used to sew bed sheets, Nakshi kantha*, and she had a lot of orders that gave her a small income.

Before joining Nijera Kori, Ishita and the other women in the village lived secluded from the rest of the community. They weren't allowed to go outside of their homes. “We were so timid that we couldn't converse freely with people, we didn't dare to go out of home. We were so timid that we were not able to understand our capacity. That we could talk to people freely or go out to the market.” Ishita explains how she and other women got teased by men on the road if they moved outside of home. They were easy targets since they were poor girls and didn't have the voice to protest.” We saw that the rich girls weren't teased as they had more power to protest. Before joining NK, we didn't even understand how to say these things to people, how to protest.”

But when Ishita joined the organisation, it made a lot of impact on her freedom, her capacities and confidence. She has always been shy and insecure when there are a lot of other people around, but through six trainings and by being a group leader, she now has the confidence to talk to other people, no matter how many they are. The first training Ishita participated in made her realise the importance of having a voice and to use that voice:

“You have to speak to others to understand or to get to know about the society you live in. We (the landless) need to talk with different classes of people in the society, like our children's teachers, doctors, governmental officers etc. I have learned that we really need to talk other people, we need to not always be silent. If I don't talk or express my mind to others, I have to live just in my home, I will

* A type of embroidered folk art quilt.

be captivated in my household.”

To have a voice is important to be able to have access to different spheres in the society, and be able to have an impact on one's own life, to be an active member of a family and a community. Ishita explains further that women have become much more active after joining NK, that they now can move more freely and take part of something bigger than just the family. “The training gave me a lot of courage, it has given me a lot that has changed my way of life.” The trainings have been crucial for Ishita's improvements in life. She has learned about human rights and her own rights in the society and how to claim these rights.

In her group it is just one more woman that has got training. According to Ishita, there is a problem with getting group members to training. A lot of them don't want to go because they are too busy in the household. They also fear to go because they have never been that far away without their family members. Ishita tries to convince them to go by explaining what they can learn and how they can be benefited from the training. She would like to have more trained group members:

“I feel that, if two or three other group members got training, it would be really helpful to make our group more powerful. So that nobody can deprive us, exploit us and these things. If any woman is victimized or facing violence by her husband in our area, we could take stronger action. If we had a lot of group members that have got training and had strong voices like me, we could help her better.”

Ishita consider fundamentalism to be the main obstacle for women in her area, depriving women of their right rights: “They say that you can't go out of home only wearing sari or salwar kamiz, that you need to put on a burqa or a niqab. They think women should be kept in household and shouldn't go out of home. If women go out of home they will get spoiled. I feel very bad about this, they are discriminating us women, and we have also the right to go out of home like men do. Even if we don't wear burqa we cover our self with the veil of the saris. So what is the problem with only wearing saris?”

Ishita has had conversations with her village people, especially with women about these issues, that there is no need to wear a burqa or niqab to be protected from men. She thinks that it is necessary to make people aware about their rights and their right to freedom. “Fundamentalists try to keep women home by saying that it is the rule of religion, but it is not like that. We have a lot of rights.”

The number of fundamentalists has increased in the last five years according to Ishita, and they have

a lot of influence on common people, especially women. “Trough religion, and religious scriptures they scare the women and threatens them with living the eternal life in hell if they go outside home, and by this a lot of women is captive in their own homes.”

The equality in Ishita's home increased after her first son was born. Her husband became more willing to help in the household by his own will, but she also talked with him about equality between men and women and that they should stick together in the household, as a team. Sometimes her son and husband help her in the kitchen, putting straws or fuel to the chullha*, whenever she is busy with something else. And her son also helps her rearing the goats and her husband feeds them as well. Her husband is not a member of NK, he wants to be a member because he likes NK's work but there are no male groups in the village. Ishita says that is because the men are not able to have savings together.

In her own group, they use the savings when it has grown to a large amount. Sometimes they spent it collectively, they leased land for a limited time and cultivated lentils. Other times they split the money equally between each other. Ishita once bought a goat and another time she made her gold earrings that she always wears. She would like to have a land by her own so that they could cultivate and be “real” farmers instead of being daily workers.

The group has had impact of the community as well. If there is any problem they try to help each other: “For example, if there is any problem of having a marriage here, that they don't have that much money for it, we collect money for that marriage. We have done that before two or three times. There was an incident that the bridegroom's parents came to see the bride and the bride's parents couldn't afford to have them on a visit, so we just helped them by raising money from our group members. But sometimes we can't afford to give monetary help, but by giving suggestions we try to help out and to be a support for others.”

Ishita is very happy and proud to be a part of Nijera Kori:

“I like NK because they are not doing any injustice, they help people to get justice and they never tolerate injustice by themselves. They also give encouragement. So these are the things that we like most, this is why I love to be a part of NK's work.”

* A clay stove.

“We are not very vulnerable right now, because we are in a group”

Shukla, a 26 year old woman, living in Bagatipara in a brick house with two rooms and a small yard with her two daughters, two and twelve years old together with her husband who is a carpenter. Shukla's childhood was very short. She had to quit school in 5th standard because the family could not afford the expenses. She was then kept in the household around three to four years until the family felt that they could not keep her in the house any longer. They didn't have the money to accommodate her and they feared that she and the family's honour could be ruined. Therefore, she was married off at fourteen. This was a catastrophe for Shukla, who were still playing with dolls together with the other children in the area and she had no perception of married life.

Before she and other women in her village joined Nijera Kori and formed a group they had very limited freedom to move and to express themselves. “ We could not express our feelings and we were not allowed to go out of home, not even to the market, whatever our husbands bought for us we had to wear, whether we liked it or not”.

Nine years ago, staff from NK's sub center came and talked about women's rights and freedom with both women and men in the village. Shukla got really interested in what the staff was talking about and thought that if she joined she might also get that freedom. A lot of women and men in the village formed groups around that time, which are still active. Shukla's husband is also a member of Nijera Kori.

Since then there have been a lot of changes in her life. Shukla has not yet gone to training but she has been to one workshop and through group discussion she has learned a lot, both about women's rights and how to talk to people about different topics. She also thinks that her freedom has increased, both because of her awareness of her rights and also because of her husband's awareness. Her husband has completely changed his mind after joining NK. Before he didn't allow her to go to the market or go out to collect food for their goats, but nowadays Shukla can do that. She usually doesn't go to the market but if her husband can't go she will go, encouraged by her husband.

There has also been a positive effect of the life in the village since the formation of the groups. There is a stronger cohesiveness and solidarity amongst each other in the village. If any of the group members faces any problems, they try to help each other out. There is also much less domestic violence in the village, according to Shukla, because now people step up for the victim and protest against the violence:

“Before, people used to beat their women and nobody cared about that, men could grab a woman out of the house, nobody cared about that. Men could even kill their wives and nobody would care or protest against it. So after forming the group, we are now aware, especially the women, and we try to protest against these kinds of injustices for women in this area. If we hear of any violence in a household we go there in a group and tell them that if you don't stop the domestic violence we will call the police. And people get frightened of us, being a big group like that.”

Still there are a lot of people in the village that are, as Shukla puts it, “old minded” and are adverse of women's increased freedom. If she is talking to a man out on the road, some of the women, especially the older ones, tend to talk behind her back. They don't think it is proper for a woman to talk to other men, and believe that Shukla might get spoiled by doing that. Shukla tries to talk to the women and to make them understand that there is nothing wrong about a woman talking to a man. She wants to change their way of thinking: “I want to make a little change in them and I try to make them understand, but still, it doesn't always work. It's tough because these people don't want to change. But if I carry on trying, one day there might be a change here.”

Earlier there have been some mullahs in their village that have been quite oppressive on women. If the mullahs had a meeting in the village and a woman wanted to sit down to hear what they were saying or even just passing by, they started shouting at the woman to go away and not be out in public: “The women used to reply by asking what is wrong with being a woman, we are also human beings and if we could join we could also learn from you.” The members of NK had long conversations with the mullahs about women's rights and also about poor people's rights in the society. The mullahs did not only just listen to what the members had to say, they also became group members. So nowadays women can walk past or be around the mullahs without getting any comments.

The biggest gain of being a group member for Shukla is the support she gets from the organisation:

“I don't want any financial help from NK. I just want their mental support and also their suggestions. We want to improve our lives, not only with financial help. We have to improve our minds at first. And all of us are not aware of our rights, so we're learners. Some people in our groups are educated about women's- and human rights. It is through the change of our mentality we can really change our lives.”

Shukla really enjoys sitting down with her group and staff from NK to discuss different topics, like dowry or child marriage. She says that she has learned a lot about these problems and also how to sing the mass people's songs. After a meeting, Shukla and her husband always discuss what they have learned at their respective meeting. "In this way we exchange our minds and as a result our perspectives are broadening."

Shukla feels that she has much more freedom now and is satisfied with what she is able to do. "I'm free now because my husband never puts restriction on me whenever I go to the market or go out to any of my relatives' houses, so I feel that I'm enjoying my freedom."

There is only one income in Shukla's family. They get enough for the daily expenses from her husband's salary, but Shukla wishes to contribute to the family income and to share the responsibility for the family's economy. She also wants the family to be able to have their own savings for unexpected incidences in the future. But right now, Shukla is not willing to work outside of home because of how employers are exploiting women's workforce in the area. "You can get as little as 50 taka for working hard from dawn to dusk, that's why I don't want to work outside of home."

Over all, Shukla is very satisfied with what the membership has done for her. She feels that she has a bigger freedom to move and to choose for herself. She believes that joining NK has made a big impact for the conditions in her and other women's lives. "We are not very vulnerable right now, because we are in a group, if we face any kind of problem we solve that by ourselves. Because we stick together in a group."

“I got a lot of confidence and my ideas just changed after my trainings because I learned that women are equal to men”

Nishad is a 35 year old woman living with her husband, daughter and son. Her daughter is in 10th standard and her son in 8th standard. Her husband works as daily labourer and she is a tailor, working from home. The family have cows and goats, and her husband and son helps her to rear them. The family share the household work, her daughter, husband and son are also helping her to cook. Nishad is very active in her community and is helping others and taking part of the local shalish*. But this was not the case six years ago, when she had not yet joined Nijera Kori and became a group leader.

“I had no such confidence that I could talk to people and I had no idea how to talk to people in general. And then when I saw that a lot of sisters from NK staff, went to our villages and had conversations with people, I liked their talks and topics of what they were discussing, like exploitation of the poor by the rich and that if the poor people had the notion that if the vulnerable can stick together and organise a group they can strongly protest against this injustice or exploitation. When they were talking, I learned things that I was not aware of before. I felt inspired so I joined.”

Nishad wanted to join because she had observed a lot of injustice in her community, like domestic violence, dowry, rape, and violence against women connected to dowry, but she did not know how to address these problems:

“I saw that there were injustices around us. That men have all the facilities around here and women were deprived of them. But I thought that it was supposed to be like that and I didn't have the courage to protest against it. But now, I have the courage and I don't tolerate any injustice in front of me, I directly protest if I see any. I got a lot of confidence and my ideas just changed after my trainings because I learned that women are equal to men. Women also have the right to have all the facilities from the society. It's about education, to have facilities to proper education but also about freedom to move, as men are going out of home to earn money or to support their family. Women are also capable to go outside and earn to support their families.”

When Nishad formed the group, she had the possibility to have training and learn about her rights in society and how to demand those rights. She is very clear that the changes in her life have been made by herself and no others, as a result of her gained confidence:

* Shalish, a village court or village arbitration

“It was *me* that took the courage to go outside and to move freely, even though my husband didn't allow me, I had to go out. I realised that I needed to go out to work or just to have conversation with other people. I felt that I am just like others, who are capable to do a lot of things. I was scared of talking to staff at government offices. But I have now overcome my fear, through the training and workshops I have attended, I have increased my confidence so now I can really talk to people.”

Nowadays Nishad is helping others in different governmental offices to get the support that they are eligible for. Before she joined she wanted to do something about all the injustice she saw and to help others but she had no idea how to talk to people in power. Now she has a lot of support from group members which give her the courage that is needed to take action. Her husband is now also supporting her and he never complains about her moving freely. Nishad says that it is because he understands her work, that she is doing good and he is proud of that.

Nishad also take part of shalish, which is still quite rare for a woman in her area to do. Nishad is allowed to participate and the congregation listens to her suggestions because the men in her community know about her previous work and achievements in the area. Therefore, they respect her and they are willing to take suggestions from her, which would be impossible if she was just an average woman in the village. In the shalish she is the voice for other women that are not allowed to have influence in the decision making.

The biggest problem for women in her area is, according to Nishad: “the patriarchal system, the husband and the social system that never allows us to go out of home. The men think we are vulnerable and that we are meant to stay in our household”. To be kept in the household and only have contact with family members cuts women off from the rest of society. Nishad believes that because women are being kept to the family members only, it decreases women's ability to take part of the surrounding society even more since they don't have a social network.” Nobody knows you and you don't know anyone.”

Previously when Nishad went out of home there were a lot of people that said to her to cover up with a veil or to wear a burqa. But Nishad has never even considered doing so. She would not like to wear a burqa because she doesn't feel the need to cover up, she thinks that her mind and voice are powerful enough to protect herself from others. Nishad also explains that she would be captivating herself if she put a burqa on. Her own identity would be lost and nobody would recognize her on the road, not even her own family.

When Nishad's group has raised their voice against injustice they have faced a lot of resistance from people in power positions, annoyed that women are interfering, saying to the women to not be so “intrusive and anxious”, that the men can sort out the problem by themselves. There was an incident with a rape in the village and the victim was not helped by the village head:

“They had not done anything about it during the whole day and when we saw that they were inactive with that case, the women in my group and around our community tried to help her, the victim. We went to the village head's wife and had a conversation with her so that she could influence her husband to do something about the rape case. So in this way we tried to help the woman to have justice. We also put pressure on the police to act and now the perpetrator is in jail.”

Despite the sometimes negative reaction from the surroundings, the group and their activities have had a positive effect on their community. Because of what the group has accomplished, the men in the village is re-evaluating women's capacity and ability to be change makers and therefore the general view of women as powerless and not equal to men has changed. Women in the group are more respected by the men now.

Although Nishad's group has taken a lot of action, she wishes that the group could be stronger. There are four other members in her group that also got training from NK but Nishad thinks that if more members could have training they could be stronger as a group. However, there is a problem of getting people to go to training. The biggest problem for the members is being away for a couple of days which will affect their income. Since 15 of the 20 members in Nishad's group are daily labourers and very dependent of the daily income, it is very hard for them to go away for a couple of days. Another aspect of the problem with getting people to training is according to Nishad, that the members are very timid and afraid of going away from the family. They have never left their family before and have never travelled, or at least not without them.

Nishad grew up without a mother, she died when Nishad was just three years old, and her stepmother was not treating her well, so her grandfather introduced a boy to marry. The boy also didn't have a mother and they got married when she was thirteen years old. She didn't have any proper education but she sometimes went to night school as a child, so she's not fully illiterate. For Nishad it has been very important to give her daughter an education since she herself has never been to school regularly and didn't want to deprive her daughter of what she has been deprived of. Her husband never thought of educating their daughter to 10th standard, but Nishad was insisting to:

“I wish that no woman would become the burden of their families. So I try my best to make both of my children proper human being and educated, I don't want my daughter to become a burden in her future in-law's house.”

Nishad believes that there are two approaches for women to get their rights. Since the patriarchal structures are very strong, it is the men, the fathers, brothers and uncles and later the husbands that are in control of women and often the hindrances of women getting their rights. According to Nishad, a woman can either ask politely for the right that she is deprived of, or she can simply take it. “There are two types of husbands, if your husband always supports you, you can share with him and say to him what you need. But if he's not that type, then don't ask, and do it by our self, as I always do”. Although this might be problematic admits Nishad, if the woman is not strong enough to stand up against her husband.

As mentioned before, the trainings from Nijera Kori have had a big impact on Nishad's life. Not only has her knowledge about her own position and about society in large increased, she has also got a bigger social network as a result of having training with other women from different areas. Nishad has exchanged phone numbers with some of the trainees that she connected with and they are still in contact with each other. They share all things in life over the phone and for Nishad it is a great support to have these women just a phone call away: “Whenever I have some sort of problem, I discuss with them and I take their suggestions. That makes me feel very good because I have someone by my side.”

Over all it is the support from Nijera Kori that Nishad feels is the most important thing for her: “The best thing that I like about NK is that whenever we have any kind of problems or any type of dangers and whenever we seek help from them they instantly come there to help us, they are always beside us.”

Concluding discussion

Overall there have been some general and recurring issues throughout the interviews regarding the support from NK, the ability to express one self and to have a voice, the achievements of training, the importance of having training and the difficulties of sending people to training. These issues will be briefly discusses in the following section.

When it comes to what these women feels/expresses about what they are gaining by being organised with NK it is essentially about the support from the staff and the organisation. Nishad says: “The best thing that I liked about NK is that whenever we fell in any type of problems or any type of danger and whenever we seek help from them they instantly come there to help us, they are always beside us”, and Shukla says: “I don't want any financial help from Nijera Kori. I just want their mental support and also their suggestions”.

Because of their vulnerable position, to have the support of the staff and to have a well-established organisation like NK backing them up in all sorts of situations is a relatively unusual recourse for this group of people. To be a landless woman generally means that you have a small network inside a family and not to have support from any institutions outside the private sphere. To get this support and encouragement from NK is, as Nishad and Shukla expresses one of the most important aspects of what they are gaining from being a member.

All five women have expressed a change of their ability to express themselves after joining Nijera Kori as an important change for them. They all said that they have gained more confidence in talking to people and learned not only *how* to express their thoughts and feelings but also that what they express has a value, that someone want to hear what they have to share. As a result, they have not only learned how to protest against small and big scale injustices, they have also recognised that they are entitled to have a voice in the private sphere and in the public sphere alike. To have a stronger voice has changed these women's perception of themselves as members of a household and in their community. They feel that they now can actively take part of their surroundings and not just be passive spectators of what is happening around them. As Ishita puts it: “If I don't talk or if I don't express my mind to others, I have to live just in my household, I will be captivated in my household”.

However, it is not all women that have got that confidence to speak and to claim their space. As with Shukla, her confidence to express herself is not as strong as the confidence of the four other women. She hesitated to give me a second interview since she was not sure if she had been giving me the

“correct answers” to my questions. She still doubts her ability to express herself. When I tried to ask general questions, I found that she had a harder time answering them, than the other four women. Shukla was the only one that I interviewed that had not been to any training by NK. This selection was not an intentional choice from my side, it was just hard to find people without any training that could or wanted to participate in my interviews. From my observations at group meetings it was very clear for me whom had got trainings and whom had not. The persons that were very active at the meeting, discussing or asking questions, raised their voice were almost always the ones that had been to training. A lot of the women I met in group meetings was not comfortable to even say their name in front of me and the other members.

As seen in these five case studies, training is an important component of having a greater ability to express one self and communicate with others. The trainings have increased the women's confidence to speak and to claim more space in the private as well as in the public. For Ishita it has been the key factor for her own development: “The training gave me a lot of courage, it has giving me a lot that have changed my way of life”. To have a voice is a crucial part of empowerment; it is a very fundamental element of poor people's capacity to enact their rights. The ability to speak the same language as those in positions of power makes it possible to speak and to be heard by them. To be able to have an impact on circumstances in one's own as well as on the life of others is an important aspect of empowerment.

The trainings is not just a way of getting women (and men) to improve their voice and confidence and learning about rights, power structures etc. It is also an important opportunity to meet other people in the same position and to get a wider network of organised people from different areas that are fighting for the same causes. It gives the women I interviewed a lot of support and has strengthened the feeling of unity. For Nishad it is a lot about having an extra support: “Whenever I feel some sort of problem, I discuss with them and I take their suggestions. That makes me feel very good because I have someone by my side”.

A repeating concern for the group leaders is the challenge of sending members to training. It is often difficult to motivate group members to attend trainings. Nishad, Ishita, Rashida and Mira consider that it has a lot to do with that the families to group members are unwilling to send someone away since that person is needed in the household or out in the field for daily labour. Especially during harvest season, it is hard to send people to training because they are extremely busy and for a lot of families it is the crucial time of getting a bigger income and to pay back loans. Therefore, sometimes because of pressure from the family, group members are hesitating to go to training.

But the unwillingness of going to training is also about perception of the achievement of training. Since some NGOs are paying their members for training, but not NK, a lot of group members and their family members are questioning the purpose of going. They cannot appreciate what a person can actually gain/achieve through training and therefore they are reluctant to join the training. The abilities acquired at the trainings are often of an abstract nature and therefore difficult to grasp and measure, especially for people who have not received the same training.

It is also very uncommon that married women go far away for some days, without any family member and just for the reason for her own self development. Since the training is about getting skills that is not related to any economic profit it might be seen as an unnecessary investment to send her away. A wife is the central part of the household, so who will cook, feed the children, wash cloths, rear the goats, chicken or cows when she's away?

Summations

This short concluding discussion is my own reflections of the five case studies that I have conducted. To make proper generalisations I would have needed more material and longer fieldwork. However, some tendencies are possible to distinguish from these case studies. As already mentioned before, the most noticeably issues are about the importance of having a voice when it comes to empowerment and the connection with training and having a voice. There has been such a remarkable difference among group members that have had training and the ones that have not when it comes to the ability to express and to have the courage to claim space in interactions with others. I therefore believe that it would be very fruitful if a bigger number of members had the opportunity to go to training, and for this reason it is also very important to consider the problems of sending members to training and what can be done to ease these problems.