

nijera kori



নিজের কন্ঠ

Women and Livelihood in Rural Bangladesh:

Gender Specific Vulnerabilities in Coastal Noakhali

Émilie Rochon Gruselle, September 2013



At the moment of its birth as an independent state in the aftermath of the gruesome Liberation War against Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh was a country devastated by war, a manmade famine, and a destructive succession of natural calamities. The newly formed nation found itself in desperate need of international assistance in order to extricate itself from the chaos into which it was born. With the rapid proliferation of international partnerships and donors, the country quickly became a fertile testing ground for “sustainable development”, and, to this day, harbours within its borders one of the most extensive networks of non-profit organizations in the world. Due to the inability of the national government body to provide any reliable and effective form of social safety net for its citizens, the country’s not-for profit sector has more often than not, over the past three decades, been the only recourse for the country’s extremely poor and vulnerable citizens, of whom women have been statistically proven to be worse off than their male counterparts.

Women’s rights are today widely considered as one of the most pressing human right’s issue by a plethora international development bodies (UN), human rights agencies (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), independent researchers, and the like. Ever since the late 1970s, with the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by the UN General Assembly (CEDAW, 1979), and more recently with the emphasis put on gender equality and women’s empowerment in the UN millennium goals, the role and potential of marginalized women in the eradication of worldwide poverty has truly been brought to the forefront of the National Women Development policy of Bangladesh and the international development agenda.

In the decade following the independence of Bangladesh, the country’s development sector, in line with the growing international consensus around the importance of putting gender at the heart of development policy, saw a multitude of its organisations re-orient their activities towards a more gender sensitive approach. This shift in perspective took on different forms, from micro-credit institutions lending exclusively to women, to a multitude of organizations focusing on developing women’s skill sets (i.e. art crafts) in order to provide them with “employable” expertise. Nevertheless, gender issues were and continue to be addressed in a somewhat superficial manner: most NGOs in Bangladesh still currently focus on research and/or operate following a service delivery-based approach, with the root causes of a persistent oppressive patriarchal structure rarely being addressed.

The aim of this essay is to examine the socio-economic vulnerabilities of women in the district of Noakhali, ranging from the negative impacts strict moral codes and restricted

mobility, income insecurity, and, more widely, to the difficulties women face as the main caretakers of their homes and kin.

In analyzing the situation of women in this area, there will be an assessment of the role of Bangladeshi NGO Nijera Kori, an organization dedicated to building social awareness, mobilization and voice around gender-based issues. Nijera Kori (*"We Do It Ourselves"* in Bangla) is a Bangladeshi NGO with a grassroots philosophy and rights-based approach that utilizes group-building methods in order to provide the country's most downtrodden citizens with knowledge and tools to claim and assert their rights. Although the organisation is very active in different areas of the country, this essay seeks to assess if and how membership with Nijera Kori has impacted the lives of women in the chars¹ in the south-eastern coastal district of Noakhali.

An overview of the situation of gender-specific vulnerability in coastal Bangladesh will be analyzed against a backdrop consisting of interviews conducted with twenty female Nijera Kori group members of Sharbarnachar Upazila (sub-district). The data collected over the course of these interviews will be utilized to produce a microcosmic reflection on the fruit of Nijera Kori's efforts towards fostering greater empowerment and socio-economic mobility of marginalized women in this traditionally conservative area of Bangladesh.

¹ Chars are sandbars that emerge within the context of river erosion and accumulation and are used for cultivation and settlement once the land is ready for vegetation.

Gender-Specific Vulnerabilities in Coastal Noakhali

To fully grasp the underlying causes of women's precarious lifestyles in the district of Noakhali, it is fundamental to provide an overview of the deep-rooted patriarchal structure that strictly regulates gender roles in rural Bangladesh. The restrictions imposed by *purdah*, or the seclusion of women, are particularly strong in rural societies: a strict set of norms is widely enforced and is determinant of the spectrum of activities and behaviours within which women are expected to evolve. These limits are at the basis of gender-specific vulnerabilities in rural society, regulating female social and economic mobility all the while positioning women as primary caregivers and caretakers of their households and kin. Only very poor households are unable to keep their women in seclusion and thus to follow the rules of *purdah*. The ability (or inability) to do so is a powerful indicator of social status and familial honour. In this regard, women who do not fit the prescribed lifestyle associated to what is considered "respectable" are shunned and discriminated against by society but also by their own, since their behaviour is representative of the family as a whole and thus any straying from the norm has implications that widely surpass the individual².

The influence of religion is inherent to the concept of *purdah* and, historically speaking, Noakhali has always been known as a stronghold for fundamentalism in Bangladesh. The nearly forgotten Noakhali riots of 1946³, marked by a wave of violence perpetrated against the Hindu and Buddhist minorities, as well as recent mob raids carried out by Hefazat and Jamaat-e-Islami supporters⁴ in this region are reminders of the fact that, although the situation has evolved over the years, fundamentalism and the strict religious moral codes that go along with it are still the norm within the area's communities.

Moreover, in rural Bangladesh, personal matters are overseen by a traditional communal judicial body known as the *shalish*, which settles personal grievances that occur within the village: "in its present incarnation, the *shalish* is often seen as the arbiter of Islamic morality

² Kabeer, Naila. 1991. "The Quest for National Identity: Women, Islam and the State in Bangladesh". *Feminist Review* no.37 (spring): 293

³ Sinha, Dinesh Chandra. 2011. *1946: The Great Calcutta Killings and Noakhali Genocide*. Online. Consulted on 29/08/13. http://www.eastbengal.org/bengal1946_calcutta_noakhali_killing.pdf

⁴ Ethirajan, Anbarasan. 2013. *Bangladesh Minorities 'Terrorized' After Mob Violence*. Online. Consulted on 03/09/13. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21712655>

and has come to play a significant role in judging the behaviour of women⁵. This resolution system arbitrates on private matters such as divorce, inheritance and custody, and is generally governed by men; it is gender-biased and instrumental in maintaining women at the level of second-rate citizens within their communities. Hence, the predominance of conservative Islam and the resolution of private affairs through an informal system reinforce *purdah* and further hinder women's sovereignty over their own lives.

As such, women are traditionally assigned and confined to the domestic domain. Their work within the household, which can amount to fourteen hours a day spent processing the harvest, cooking, cleaning, rearing livestock and homestead gardening, is rarely, if ever, duly recognised; "despite being de facto managers of the household, women have no say in the decision making⁶".

Although *purdah* aims at keeping women within the domestic sphere, it also assigns them the role of primary food producers and providers, as well as that of the main guardians of the health of their kinfolk. Therefore, although women's mobility is strictly regulated by their male family members, be it fathers, husbands or sons, and although men are the ones generating and controlling the income due to the social restrictions regarding women's say in family matters as well as their involvement in wage labour, they are nevertheless responsible for managing the household.

This contradiction explains why food insecurity is of greater concern for women, who, apart from relying on their husband's wages and the yield from their homestead and livestock, have few options when it comes to providing for their families if and when the need arises to supplement their husband's income: "[...] *the majority of households living in the Noakhali chars belong to the extreme poor and have few livelihood options. [...] It has been found that at least 16% of households [...] are headed by women*⁷." Furthermore, land is scarce, and a majority of households settled in this area are landless, with men usually working

⁵ Feldman, Shelley. 2001. "Theories of Patriarchy: A Perspective From Contemporary Bangladesh". *Globalization and Gender* 26 (no.4) : 1108

⁶ Ahmed, Md. Kawser, Halim, Sadeka, and Sultana, Shamima. 2012. "Participation of Women in Aquaculture in Three Coastal Districts of Bangladesh: Approaches Toward Sustainable Livelihood. *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 8 (3): 257

⁷ Ahmed, Md. Kawser, Halim, Sadeka, and Sultana, Shamima. 2012. "Participation of Women in Aquaculture in Three Coastal Districts of Bangladesh: Approaches Toward Sustainable Livelihood. *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 8 (3): 255.

sporadically at odd jobs or on other people's farms as day-labourers earning very little income, rarely enough to sustain their families. This forces men to migrate to Dhaka or the nearest city, sometimes up to several times a year, in order to survive and, in the best of cases, send back a significant portion of their pay.

As men often migrate for the better part of the year, the women who stay behind are left in a state of extreme poverty and vulnerability due to the absence of male guardianship. This often forces them to step outside the boundaries of traditionally accepted wage-labour activities that are usually performed within the confines of the private domain. As such, it has been argued that poverty and increased male migration act either as a vector for change which reduces the practice of *purdah*, or, on the contrary, that *purdah* is a resilient institution that maintains women in poverty and that, despite their growing participation in the formal market (as day-labourers in rural areas or, for example, in the garment industry in urban areas), their expected seclusion and subjugation remains a widespread reality⁸. Solid arguments can be and have been made in favour of both opposing views, yet the fact remains that even if women do participate in the family income, their control over family resources always comes second to that of their husband's⁹, which is evidently problematic as the responsibility of managing the household always falls upon the women.

Extreme poverty and limited livelihood options, combined with a deep-rooted patriarchal socio-political construct legitimized by religion, explains why the lives of women living in the chars of Noakhali district are marked by a great degree of adversity, with little available recourse to alleviate their situation. The fundamental importance of male stewardship makes it safe to assume that although women are expected and socially contrived to forgo formal employment, they cannot do without a guardian. It also explains the prevalence of illegal but widespread practices such as child marriage and dowry; archaic customs meant to embed women in a web of dependency and socio-economic segregation, both necessary

⁸ Amin, Sajeda. 1997. "The Poverty-Purdah Trap in Rural Bangladesh: Implications for Women's Roles in the Family". *Development and Change* 28 (no.2): 214

⁹ weADAPT. 2012. *Women's Vulnerability to Natural Disasters in Noakhali*. Online. <http://weadapt.org/knowledge-base/vulnerability/bangladesh-ncap-gender-issues>. Consulted on 10/08/13

to uphold a male-dominated public space in a society where “[...] a woman’s worth is evaluated on the basis of reproductive rather than productive capacities¹⁰”.

This belief system is deep-rooted within rural societies in Bangladesh; any efforts towards durable change must take this into account. This latter part of this essay seeks to assess the work that has been done by Nijera Kori in this regard; as a grassroots organization with a holistic approach, emphasis is put on the importance of addressing the root-causes of poverty, and as such, this particular organization has always stressed the importance of gender-parity and the necessary dismemberment of a socio-political structure that maintains women as second-rate citizens.

Nijera Kori: Grassroots Organization and A Rights-Based Approach To Development

Nijera Kori was originally founded in the aftermath of the 1974 famine in order to help provide food, shelter and alternate livelihoods to rural women who made their way to Dhaka in search of relief. It wasn’t until the 1980s that the organization morphed into its present form. A structural shift took place when a number of BRAC field organizers joined Nijera Kori due to their frustration with the former organization’s decision to move away from awareness building and social organization towards an approach centred on service delivery, where the emphasis was put on individual rather than collective empowerment¹¹.

As such, Nijera Kori represents a divergence from the norm within the development sector in Bangladesh; it is one of the few that puts community building through individual awareness-raising at the centre of its activities, with a bottom-up democratic management and organizational structure. The NGO works by regrouping poor and marginalized rural landless people (they comprise the majority of members) within the villages of its working areas, and by setting up meetings meant to inform, educate and organize them, with the aim to render them autonomous in the petition for that which has been denied them: their rights (such as access to land, food security, women’s rights, etc.) as citizens of Bangladesh.

¹⁰ Ahmed, Md. Kawser, Halim, Sadeka, and Sultana, Shamima. 2012. “Participation of Women in Aquaculture in Three Coastal Districts of Bangladesh: Approaches Toward Sustainable Livelihood. *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 8 (3): 257

¹¹ Kabeer, Naila. 2002. *‘We Don’t Do Credit’: Nijera Kori Social Mobilisation and The Collective Capabilities of The Poor in Rural Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Nijera Kori: p.2

Nijera Kori's work has a strong gender-component: the organization recognizes that the innate patriarchal structure of Bangladeshi rural society must be addressed in order to implement lasting change, and, as such, their overall philosophy, activities, and group discussions are oriented towards bettering their members' understanding of the prevailing gender bias and its repercussions on society as a whole.

In the initial stage of group formation, men and women are separated as to allow female members to speak freely, without the unease they would indubitably feel if their male counterparts were present. It is only in subsequent training levels, when women have gained the confidence required to address such a sensitive issue, that men and women are united in common group discussions. During group discussions led by women, a panoply of issues are addressed: many of them, such as female mobility and empowerment, joint savings and female participation in decision making related to the household, are directly linked to questions of gender-parity and the recognition of the role of women within the community.

First hand accounts are important to take into consideration for one to be able to truthfully and faithfully assess the impacts that Nijera Kori's training and advocacy activities have had on women's day-to-day lives. The testimonies used in this section to measure the organization's achievements in regards to female empowerment are the fruit of twenty individual interviews conducted with women from Shubarnachar Upazila (sub-district), located in Nijera Kori's Charjabbarworking area, during the month of July 2013.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to offer a glimpse into the lives of the women living in the selected study area of Shubarnachar Upazila in Noakhali district. The sample size consisting of twenty interviews is relatively small in comparison to the total population mass; nevertheless, their qualitative nature allowed a great degree of insight and, as such, the testimonies consist of a microcosmic reflexion that offers an overview of the situation in a wider sense. Leaving behind a more scientific approach, the interviews consisted of a range of open-ended questions that allowed for the conversation to evolve organically; information that would have been neglected had the questions been rigorously prepared was volunteered by the interviewees themselves. Setting out with a precise idea of what they *want* to hear, researchers often unknowingly impose restrictions that greatly hinder their ability to obtain a complete and honest portrait of their subjects.

Seeing as the goal of this research was to offer qualitative, first-hand accounts of the vulnerability and ensuing struggles faced by women in Subarnachar, all the while conducting an assessment of the influence their membership with Nijera Kori had on their lives, it was important to interact with the interviewees on a more personal, informal level. This approach was key in identifying what is most important and notable to these women, in order to obtain a candid depiction of the situation.

The selected interviewees had, for the most part, been members of Nijera Kori for over a decade. This was a decisive factor in their selection, seeing as their long lasting association with the organization gave them the authority and knowledge to comment on the way in which the lives of women had evolved over the course of Nijera Kori's involvement in the area. Over the course of the interviewing period, it was noted that most women had joined the organization for one of three reasons. Either one or more of their family members were members of Nijera Kori; they had been convinced of the benefits of membership after a visit from the NGO's female staff to their village; they heard about Nijera Kori's accomplishments and realizations through members of their community or experienced them first-hand.

The testimonies collected over the interviewing period were regrouped by theme and divided into three sections: female mobility and access to livelihood options; joint savings and household decision-making; and child marriage, dowry and divorce.

Female Mobility and Access to Livelihood Options

The prevalence and importance of *purdah* and religious moral codes within Bangladeshi rural society greatly hinders women's ability to go about their daily lives with freedom of mobility. For the women of Shubarnachar, this means reduced access to income-generating activities and increased vulnerability when their husbands migrate for work, sometimes up to several times a year. Most of the respondents mentioned the augmented workload and stress they have to cope with when the men leave the village and leave them to provide for themselves and their families, despite most men sending back a part of their earnings. When asked how their involvement with Nijera Kori had helped them manage this situation, the women mentioned that the organization had encouraged them to stand together and had given them the confidence to step outside the confines of *purdah* in order to participate in non-conventional activities that allowed them to gain a much needed income supplement. Shaira Banu, from the village of Charjabar says:

“Being a member of Nijera Kori has taught me that there is no shame in being self-reliant. The confidence I have gained has given me the courage to

participate in economic activities; I do cropping on other people's land, despite teasing, harassment and negative comments I often receive from the men working the same field. I have been a Nijera Kori member for 10 years and I now have the confidence to educate other women in the village. I can see that we are now freer to step outside our homes, go to the market and seek wage-labour, which would not have been possible in the past".

As such, one of the recurring themes that constantly arose during the interviews was that of **self-assurance** and **empowerment**; all the women who were interviewed mentioned that the one of the most notable impact of their membership with Nijera Kori was that they had been made aware that, as women, they had rights equal to those of men. The prevalence of the patriarchal mindset is so strong in rural Bangladesh that “women’s rights” are more often than not a foreign concept not only to men, but also to women themselves. From a very early age, women are instilled with the notion that their inferiority to men is implicit, and that things such as domestic violence and the necessity of obeying one’s husband are inalienable facts of life. Respondents stressed that the first step towards a durable change in gender-dynamics was changing women’s opinion of themselves. The fear of harassment, social exclusion, and ridicule is what often halts women in their desire to speak up or integrate the public sphere, and thus Nijera Kori’s efforts to foster empowerment enable an essential shift in perspectives. Lalmoti, from Dakkhinbagga, explains:

“Nijera Kori has made me aware that, as a woman, I possess certain rights. I believe that my fellow group members and myself are much more independent now. We are self-assured and we speak up for ourselves. I even travel alone to meetings, and I stand up to my husband when he tells me it isn’t acceptable for me to leave the house on my own; he is so surprised at my boldness that nowadays, he doesn’t bother anymore. My active role within my community gives me a certain amount of power.”

Joint Savings and Household Decision-Making

Nijera Kori is very critical towards the idea that micro-credit is the optimal path towards poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. As such, the organization does not provide its members with any sort of financial help. Rather, they encourage the creation of joint savings accounts, where the amount that is put aside each weekly or monthly is equivalent to what the poorest member can afford, so that no one is left unable to participate. This practice also provides its participants with a sense of accountability towards one another and a feeling of community that is often lost when one relies on individual loans from micro-credit institutions. The money amassed is reserved to settle problems that arise within the group such as divorce, lack of food after a bad harvest, health care, education and so on. Ranu Bibi, from Maddhambagga speaks of the benefits of group savings:

“After Nijera Kori staff members came to my village, I decided, with their help, to form a landless group. We started collecting small rations of rice from every member in order to sell them in the market. We created a joint savings account with the money we earned, and we share the money when problems arise; it makes us feel more secure and autonomous.”

Joint savings and an increased participation in income-generating activities, coupled with the confidence gained by their involvement with other female members of their community, enables women to raise their voice in favour of greater participation in household decision making. It gives them a say in determining how and when the money is spent. Most respondents mentioned that, when their husbands realized they were able to earn and manage their own money effectively, they were more open to taking their wives’ opinions regarding spending and income management into account. Ajima Khatum, from the village of Maddhambagga, says:

“I participate in joint savings accounts and work as a day labourer in the field. My husband respects my opinion and values my input regarding household spending. We take decisions jointly, and he helps me with household chores like cooking and bathing our grandchildren; he even washes my saris!

Child Marriage, Dowry and Divorce

Despite being illegal under Bangladeshi law, practices such as child marriage and dowry are still widespread amongst communities in Subarnachar. Extreme poverty, the weight of tradition, and strict religious moral codes enable these customs to go on despite the

innumerable harm they cause the concerned women and their families. The dowry system represents an unlawful, massive financial burden for the bride's family, who is often forced to take out colossal loans in order to be able to afford marrying off their daughter(s)— loans that they may never be able to reimburse. Child marriage is also prevalent in very poor households, simply because the younger the daughter, the lower the dowry. As such, families are often eager to give their daughters away at an early age in order to escape crippling debt. Nijera Kori has made many efforts to spread knowledge about the devastating impacts brought on by these practices, which most families never thought to contest because they are widely normalized in rural communities. Relentless advocacy and awareness building by staff members has nevertheless bared fruit, as Amena Begum of Charmohiuddin describes:

“Child marriage, dowry, polygamy, domestic violence and divorce have all been reduced in my village, due to Nijera Kori's presence and influence. When these cases occur, we, the women, speak up, and Nijera Kori staff alerts the authorities. People fear our influence, and so they are less likely to encourage or participate in such activities”

The majority of respondents insisted that their membership with Nijera Kori had provided them with the knowledge and tools necessary to educate their fellow community members—both men and women— as to the dangers and harmful pervasiveness of such practices. As Oziba Khatun from Charjabbar explains:

“Before my involvement with Nijera Kori, I didn't know there was such a thing as 'women's rights'. Now, I am able to educate others on the harmful practices of dowry and child marriage, and teach them that domestic violence is not normal nor should it be accepted as such. Through our efforts, we see that the influence of religious social norms has lessened within our community. With the reduction of child marriage, we are also able to send our daughters to school for longer periods of time”.

Conclusion

The lives of women in Bangladesh in general, and rural communities in particular, are marked by a great degree of vulnerability that negatively impacts their ability to lead a life free of every day struggles. For the women of Subarnachar, food insecurity, restricted

social and economic mobility, limited amounts of freedom due to strict religious moral codes and harmful practices such as child marriage and dowry remain a widespread reality. Nevertheless, it can be said that Nijera Kori's awareness-raising, mobilization, voice-building, and relentless advocacy have positively impacted the lives of women who have come in contact with and actively assimilated the lessons and teachings provided by the organization's staff members. Although the situation remains critical in many aspects, it is important to remember that building awareness and changing mindsets does not happen over night; such fundamental changes take time, immense amounts of effort, perseverance, courage and, most importantly, patience. Service provision and relief-based efforts might provide immediate relief to marginalized populations in the short term, but grassroots landless organization and rights-awareness are the first steps in implementing sustainable, durable change in the way rural Bangladeshi communities such as the ones in Subarnachar perceive the role, position, and value of women within society. The testimonies collected for the purpose of this essay demonstrate that although most problems the women of this area face are far from solved, change is well underway; the continuation of the work being done by Nijera Kori is crucial to consolidating the achievements that have already been made in terms of altering mindsets and somewhat lessening the harmful omnipotence of the patriarchal frame of mind. Awareness, education, and the positive implications of social mobilization are not factors that can be easily calculated. This most likely explains why, in a world that has an overwhelming tendency to measure value on a quantitative basis, organizations that function in the way that Nijera Kori does are still an exception to the norm. By recognizing the validity, significance, and positive impacts of the approach and guiding philosophy favoured by organizations such as Nijera Kori, the actors of the international development sector would perhaps in fact appreciate that not all change can be measured in numbers.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Md. Kawser, Halim, Sadeka, and Sultana, Shamima. 2012. "Participation of Women in Aquaculture in Three Coastal Districts of Bangladesh: Approaches Toward Sustainable Livelihood. *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences* 8 (3): 253-268
- Amin, Sajeda. 1997. "The Poverty-Purdah Trap in Rural Bangladesh: Implications for Women's Roles in the Family". *Development and Change* 28 (no.2): 213-233
- Ethirajan, Anbarasan. 2013. *Bangladesh Minorities 'Terrorized' After Mob Violence*. Online. Consulted on 03/09/13. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21712655>
- Feldman, Shelley. 2001. "Theories of Patriarchy: A Perspective From Contemporary Bangladesh". *Globalization and Gender* 26 (no.4): 1097-1127
- Kabeer, Naila. 1991. "The Quest for National Identity: Women, Islam and the State in Bangladesh". *Feminist Review* no.37 (spring): 38-58
- Kabeer, Naila. 2002. *'We Don't Do Credit': Nijera Kori Social Mobilisation and The Collective Capabilities of The Poor in Rural Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Nijera Kori.
- Sinha, Dinesh Chandra. 2011. *1946: The Great Calcutta Killings and Noakhali Genocide*. Online. http://www.eastbengal.org/bengal1946_calcutta_noakhali_killing.pdf. Consulted on 29/08/13.
- weADAPT. 2012. *Women's Vulnerability to Natural Disasters in Noakhali*. Online. <http://weadapt.org/knowledge-base/vulnerability/bangladesh-ncap-gender-issues>. Consulted on 10/08/13

