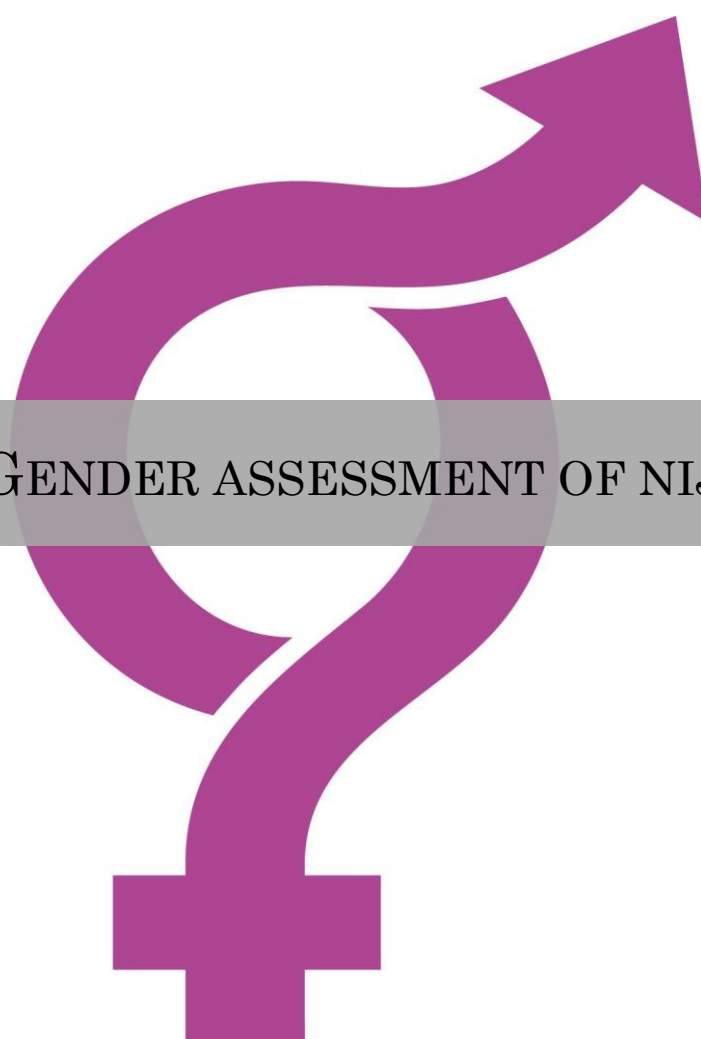


Fall 2014/2015

NIJERA
KORI

GENDER ASSESSMENT OF NIJERA KORI



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Introduction

This report is the result of my internship at Nijera Kori made possible by the Swallows India Bangladesh under the supervision of Ms. Khushi Kabir and senior staff at Nijera Kori. As I had always been interested in doing an organizational gender analysis the staff of Nijera Kori allowed me access to the inner workings of the organization as well as their own journeys and thoughts.

The purpose of this report is to look at how Nijera Kori works with gender on an organizational level. The reason for choosing this topic at this point in time is the addition of the Access-program alongside Nijera Kori's overall program in 2011. Access is a program focusing directly on issues referring to women's empowerment in social, political and economic spheres and a gender equal society on the household, community and political level. In addition to Access as a program there is an ongoing discussion within Nijera Kori of how Access and gender equality should be considered a concept that not only should be implemented in the lives of the landless groups in Nijera Kori's working areas but also among the staff and the organizational structure of Nijera Kori itself.

"Access to accountability, to raising questions to top-level management and committees, to collective decisions, collective approach, to encourage staff to embrace the vision of Access in their everyday life"

In light of this, the report will therefore look at to which extent the concept of gender equality is reflected in the internal practices and values of the organization and staff.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is of a qualitative nature with heavy influences from anthropological studies with the use of semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Information for the study has been gathered from 3 locations: Dhaka Central Office, Kumarkhali sub center and Khulna divisional center and has been gathered between the 19th September - 19th December.

Data and data collection

For the purpose of this study 9 formal interviews with Nijera Kori staff have been conducted out of which 3 were with staff in leadership positions, information has also been gathered from informal discussions with staff of Nijera Kori. Four of the respondents are women and five of the respondents are men. All respondents have been anonymized in order to protect their identities and quotations are not linked to identifiable staff for the same reason.

Part of the discussion will be based on observations made during my time at Nijera Kori. The opportunity to observe, work alongside and talk with the staff on a day to day basis presented me with a unique opportunity, allowing me to observe and discover patterns of interactions and actions that I otherwise would have missed. It also established a high degree of cordiality between me and the respondents allowing them to speak more freely during interviews. Observations and discussions from the following activities are included in the study:

- 15 group meetings both male and female
- 1 Area committee meeting
- 1 village committee meeting
- 1 Cultural long march
- 2 public meetings on women's issues

- 3 village committee conferences
- 2 cultural activities
- 1 Swallows regional partner's meeting
- Everyday observations at both field and head offices

Furthermore, statistics and documents outlining rules and policies were provided to me by the administration at the head office in Dhaka. Information about rules in the field was mainly collected from interviews with field staff.

Limitations

Three major aspects affect the outcome of my analysis as well as the quality of the information gathering. Firstly, the language, since I don't speak Bengali and the staff doesn't speak English we were dependent on an interpreter for most of our communications. Although there is a lot to be said about body language it meant that I missed out on nuances, choice of words and the way they formulate their opinions as well as information lost in translation or misunderstood. The gender policy and the sexual harassment guide lines were written in Bengali and had to be translated with the risk of a similar loss of information. The second aspect pertains to me and the values and perspectives I bring to the table as a white middle class woman from a Nordic country. The third and final aspect is that of the organizational culture and how comfortable the staff is to express opinions and thoughts that might differ from the official organizational line, these three aspects will inevitably color the findings of my study. It is also important to note that the findings of this study cannot be considered representative for the entire staff of Nijera Kori as it is based on a small number of interviews. It can however provide some insight for Nijera Kori's organizational approach to gender equality going forward.

Structure of the study

The first part of the report will provide the framework in which the gender assessment is analyzed through. This includes a review of the concept of gender in the development sector as well as key definitions and concepts. The second part will focus on staffs understanding and knowledge of a gender perspective. The third focus on institutional interventions and organizational policies while the fourth and last part will look at staff perceptions of gender in their own lives. The report ends with some concluding remarks and recommendations.

Framework of gender assessment

Incorporating women and gender into development efforts is an ongoing process in today's development work and has gone through several different phases before landing on the gender mainstreaming approach that is currently used, set by the Beijing Platform for Action from 1995.

"[...] a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality."

(ECOSOC, 1997)

Women in Development and Gender and Development

The term Women In Development (WID) was coined in the 1970's and was based on the gradual realization that modernization effected men and women differently and that top-down development schemes had an adverse effect on women (Miller and Razavi, 1995). WID identified the lack of resources as the key to women's subordination in society (Miller and Razavi, 1995). This led WID to focus on increasing women's participation in the workforce thereby granting women a higher status in society, but also help the overall development in the developing countries (Miller and Razavi, 1995). This was a big break from previous understandings of women as mothers and welfare beneficiaries and instead conceptualized women as active producers and as an untapped economic resource (Miller and Razavi, 1995). The strong focus on women and productivity, however, lacked the dimensions of social divisions and social constraints that heavily impacts women's role in the economic sector and isolated women and women's issues from society as a whole (Miller and Razavi, 1995). These constraints of the WID approach led to the development of the approach that focused more on power and gender relations called Gender and Development in the 1980's (Miller and Razavi, 1995).

The concept of Gender and Development (GAD) is based on the line of thought of feminist anthropology which argues that gender is constructed through social and cultural practices that both define and are defined by social activities of men and women (Miller and Razavi, 1995). The shift from WID to GAD can easily be explained by looking at micro-credit and rural women in Bangladesh. While the WID approach would support the allocation of resources to women through micro-credit based on their understanding of women's subordination due to their lack of resources, GAD instead focus on women's ability to control the money and participate in decision-making regarding the money within the household, therefore adding both men and power to the analysis (Miller and Razavi, 1995). This means that in order to achieve equality, power must be redistributed between men and women (Miller and Razavi, 1995), a much more radical thought than that of resource allocation.

While WID mainly focused on *how* to integrate women into the development GAD focuses on *why* they are not integrated in the first place. This has implications for how organizations work with gender and women's rights today. Based on the understanding of power and redistribution brought forward by GAD, collective action and bottom-up-development has become main themes in achieving women's empowerment (Miller and Razavi, 1995).

Since social movements are hard to create, some NGO's now act like catalysts for consciousness-raising and developing the poor's organizational capacities in order for them to articulate and demand their strategic needs. However while realizing the difficulties with this approach many organizations have retained or added again the focus of practical needs of women similar to that of the projects promoted by WID in order to bring men and women together. The difference between the new and old approach is found in the organizations capacity and vision which ensures that development projects are bottom-up and participatory. This means that the role of the NGO's will be to opening up space for women to formulate needs in order to make policy-makers aware and responsive (Miller and Razavi, 1995).

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is not a goal in itself but a process that aims for gender equality by looking at gender relations and structures. It is multidimensional strategy that challenges gender neutrality and holds both men and women accountable for the achievement of gender equality. It is a process that

aims to take into account the existing pre-conditions for different actors in everyday routines and organizational procedures and policies. In order to be able to mainstream gender it is therefore imperative to look at both practical and strategic gender needs (UNESCO, 2003, Ministry of Social Affairs, Department of Gender Equality, N/A).

Practical gender needs are practical in nature and tend to immediate needs such as water or food. These needs are non-challenging in nature and do not break commonly held perceptions about roles in society. Strategic gender needs on the other hand challenges norms and rules that create patterns of inequality and therefore varies from context to context. Meeting women's strategic gender needs entails changing socially accepted gender roles and challenges their subordinate position.

While gender mainstreaming is not a women's issue it doesn't have to replace or exclude projects or policy measures that only focus on women with the purpose of establishing gender equality. The European Union, for example, uses both measures to work towards gender equality UNESCO, 2003, Ministry of Social Affairs, Department of Gender Equality, N/A).

Gendered work and organizational structure

According to Acker (1995) every workplace is gendered through its social processes and structures and gender is therefore a major part of every organization. Acker (1995) identifies three aspects of what produces gendered organizational behavior, the first looks at the physical i.e. divisions of labor and allowed behavior, the second looks at symbols *"that explain, express, reinforce and sometimes oppose those divisions"* for example dress codes. The third look at the interactions between the opposite sex as well as men-men and women-women interactions. When looking for patterns of dominance and submission, things like interruptions and deciding the topic can be indicators for structures that recreate inequality.

However, when looking at organizations as gendered institutions it is very important to emphasize that gender differences within an organizations are created by structures and not by the men and women working there. By focusing on for example women's reproduction and sexuality, organizational structures are made legitimate while maintaining the existing gendered hierarchy (Acker, 1995)

When creating changes within an organization it is imperative to target systems of meanings and mental models as well as practices and guidelines in order for the change to become sustainable. To critically look at long-held beliefs help both individuals and organization as a whole to accept gender equality by looking at the root causes of to traditional patterns of thought (GTZ, 2001). In order to create a sustainable change, organizations must create spaces in which staff members can apply the new ideas as well as integrating the new ways into the organizations main activities (GTZ, 2001).

Key concepts

I will base my discussion on how the staff understands and discuss the concept of gender and gender equality on the definitions brought forward by UNESCO in 2003. This will help clarify the strengths and weaknesses in the understandings of both concepts and show in what areas additional training can be beneficial to further the work towards gender equality.

UNESCO (2003) defines gender as the following:

“Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). Gender roles and expectations are learned. They can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. Systems of social differentiation such as political status, class, ethnicity, physical and mental disability, age and more, modify gender roles. The concept of gender is vital because, applied to social analysis, it reveals how women’s subordination (or men’s domination) is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. It is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever.”

and Gender Equality:

“Gender Equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is therefore the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society.”

(UNESCO, 2003)

Understanding of the gender perspective and gender education

Looking at the staffs understanding of gender and gendered work is relevant as the field staff working with the landless groups are considered facilitators of the discussions that lead to the development of conscientization. It is therefore important to look at what type of understandings and practices the staff themselves bring to the discussions.

Gender

In order to actually make the shift from WID to GAD organizations and policy makers must also operationalize gender. However a report from UNRISD shows that many actors and policy documents are unsure about the meaning of gender and the implications on policies that occur with the shift from women to gender (Miller & Razavi, 1995).

During the interviews with staff members of Nijera Kori it became clear that the conceptual understanding of gender varies considerably between staff members. Only half of the interviews reflected an understanding of gender and gender roles as something socially constructed while many of the respondents confused gender with gender equality and several respondents had difficulties answering the question about gender all together:

“Gender mean equality between men and women”

“Gender means the equality among men and women, everywhere. If the women get respect and honor and the same treatment and judgment it is called gender”

“Gender also means a kind of process to develop women’s situation”

“The difference between male and female...the difference is the natural difference, the physical, but in real field we don’t have any differences. Men are educating themselves and women are also educating themselves, they are doing work and so are the women, so there is no scope to differentiate”

All respondents asked started with explaining that in school they were taught that gender or as it is called in Bengali *lingo* consisted of 4 different categories but that at Nijera Kori, gender was about men and women and the elimination of discrimination. 3 out of 6 respondents touched on the issue of how gender is created through socializing processes such as gendered toys but devoted very little time to the

aspect of gender roles. The other half failed to mention gender roles at all instead focusing only on gender equality and the larger goal of an extortion free society.

"Girls get the kitchen tools while boys get sport tools. But girls can play sports too!"

The UNESCO definition of gender views power relations as a key to understanding the sub-ordinate position of women in society but despite this few of the respondents discussed power in relation to gender if not asked directly likely the result of them not discussing gender roles or their social construction in the first case.

"Our society is a male dominated society and so here men's voices and men's power is the main thing"

Gender equality

"The equal participation of men- women is very important to establish an extortion free society."

(Nijera Kori, 2014 b)

While the question about gender was hard to answer for many of the respondents as they struggled with the definition, the more they had to say about gender equality. In the discussion on gender equality the aspect of power was very clear as well as the role of men in achieving a gender equal society.

"Because society, country and state is created by men and for men and women has no place in this"

"Men must let women to participate in decision-making, control, spend and enjoy the money they make themselves"

"Men can play an important role. Women should come forward but the men should cooperate with them, they should remove or get rid of this kind of mentality where they think or they try to make the power restricted among them."

Interestingly the aspect of socially constructed gender roles was more clearly understood in relation to discrimination and inequalities which most of the respondents also connected to the question of equal value.

"Education is for boys as they need a good job with earning potential while the girls get married early and has no use for it, therefore not necessary."

"Now however more value is ascribed to boys and men, the birth of girls are met with silence while the birth of a son is met with celebration."

"Giving importance to women as human beings, giving her importance, taking her consent, giving her voice importance, value her opinions and thoughts, everything"

Throughout the interviews it is clear that the staff members of Nijera Kori view gender equality and women's empowerment as a stepping stone towards the greater goal of achieving an equal and socially just society for all and not as a separate goal.

"Society are made half of women and half of men but women are deprived and a long way back comparatively to men so it is not possible for country or society or family to have a development because of this backwardness or lack of development of women"

This attitude towards gender and gender equality have the implication that the focus of the staff members tend to lie on those aspects which are negative i.e. cases of discrimination. However, areas in which women are considered better suited such as motherhood questions of power and gender roles

are overlooked. It is also clear that the staff members do not have a clear understanding of the concept of gender and lack the ability to define it.

Gender education

“Training is a tool to explore and encourage ownership, understanding, deepen involvement in the community”

Nijera Kori has an extensive training program for its staff and all staff is to receive the same training starting with the basic level up to advanced classes. The capacity building of its staff is monitored through an assessment and evaluation process that is to ensure the capabilities of the staff but also to give feed back to the staff on areas they need to work on and also provides refresher courses. In addition to formal training sessions such as trainings and workshops Nijera Kori uses what they call schooling sessions which contains of self studies on pre-determined topics which is then discussed together at both field and head offices.

Capacity building activities on gender				
Respondent no.	NK workshops	NK trainings	Schooling	Other
1	2	0	yes	0
2	0	1	yes	0
3	0	0	yes	yes
4	0	0	yes	yes
5	1	2-3	yes	yes
6	1	3	yes	0
7	N/A	N/A	yes	N/A
8	N/A	N/A	yes	N/A
9	N/A	N/A	yes	N/A

*Respondents 7-9 were not asked the question about workshops and trainings.

The results from the interviews show that the amount of training received on the topic of varies considerably from staff member to staff member. The differing results above are likely a result of how long staff members have been employed by Nijera Kori. Furthermore, it should be noted that gender is included in all capacity building activities from basic- advanced level included in Nijera Kori's core program. Field staff working in the Access- areas does not receive any extra training outside of Nijera Kori's core program but sessions are held discussing the outcomes and outputs of the program so that the staff have a complete understanding of how to direct the efforts in order to achieve the wanted results.

“I want and need more training, especially on gender”

All staff members participates in schooling sessions and junior staff members often sits down with older colleagues in order to discuss and learn from their experiences. It should be noted that all respondents expressed a keen interest and desire for additional and continuous training on gender as well as a very positive attitude towards developing their practical and conceptual skills and knowledge.

Institutional interventions and organizational culture

Mission and objective of Nijera Kori

Nijera Kori has been working with landless groups in its current fashion since 1980 and while it started out by working with destitute rural women moving into the cities, the organization today focus on both men and women in the rural areas in order to create a socially just society and establish the rights of the poor. Through the means of social mobilization and conscientization the organization tries to address the root causes for the current situation of deprivation and discrimination against women and the poor (Nijera Kori, 2014 a).

The mission statement and objectives of Nijera Kori bring forward an understanding of gender inequality based on strategic gender needs with a strong focus on power relations on the household, societal and political level and strongly emphasis the cooperation between men and women, similar to the thoughts of gender mainstreaming.

“Nijera Kori recognizes that gender inequality remains central to poverty and social injustice and that patriarchy perpetuates abuse and discrimination in both public and private spheres. It thus works to ensure gender equality through education and supports women's pursuits to obtain leadership roles within the community.

Nijera Kori believes that male/female relations need not be inherently antagonistic and that men can become women's allies in the struggle against patriarchal oppression.”

(Nijera Kori, 2014 a)

The mission statement however don't mention genders equality as one of the essential aspects for the organization itself but instead highlights the democratic structure.

“Nijera Kori feels that an accountable, democratic environment is absolutely essential for development. Nijera Kori imbibes democratic conduct through participation and accountability in planning, implementation, evaluation and overall management not only with the groups organised but throughout the organisation itself.”

(Nijera Kori, 2014 a)

Leadership and decision-making

Nijera Kori is headed by a female coordinator Ms. Khushi Kabir but the majority of the staff is made up by men especially on the on the field level is this noticeable. The table below provides data on Nijera Kori staff disaggregated by sex and location:

Description	Female	Male	Total
Staff at Head office administration	27	17	44
Staff in field	81	158	239
Total	108	175	

Nijera Kori practices what the organization calls participatory democracy with the staff members electing governing bodies and guiding the overall governance of the organization. The central team consists of 6 elected members out of which 3 are men and 3 are women as well as the female head coordinator.

The staff is also the main decision-making body through the bi-annual staff convention during which they elect the leaders for the area, divisional, central executive level and also have the possibility discuss policy matters. All changes in policy and rules must be brought up by the staff during the staff convention and the bi-annual staff council and then further up through the different management levels until it reaches the board. The decision for amendments however is made at the staff convention and council.

While at the head office in Dhaka there are a 50-50% split between men and women in leading positions, on the field level the majority are men. The area coordinators and the divisional coordinators are all elected by the staff during the staff conventions. At the time of data collection there were only two female area coordinators vs. 14 male area coordinators and out of the four divisional coordinators none were women. However, four of the divisional trainers are currently female and sub-centers with female staff also have female leadership. At the time of KIT's gender study in 2007 there was no female divisional trainers.

Leadership positions disaggregated by sex and location:

Description	Female	Male
In the field	7	20
At the Head office	5	5

The disparity of no. of men and women in the field is something that is brought up by several of the respondents as one of the challenges within the organization, especially when it comes to female leadership.

"The intention is, like women really want to work for Nijera Kori because it is a very women friendly organization, they can keep their children with them, lot of flexibility in which women can accommodate., but still we can't say that we have done enough"

Due to Nijera Kori's decision-making process the management level cannot directly appoint more female leaders on the field level as the coordinators are elected at the staff conventions. Instead they work towards the goal in different ways. This is done by trying to create an environment based on respect and equal opportunity through leadership programs as well as motivational work to encourage women.

"Nijera Kori are focusing to have both together so that they can have a partnership with equal participation and rights and respect and work so that women doesn't feel threatened by men."

Because gender roles are deeply personal it is hard to assess the success of programs such as those mentioned above especially when staff members may not express their true feelings.

"Maybe some of the staff members still have the mentality "that we are the men and we should have the power" but when it comes to expressing these feelings they don't, they say that they are ok with women leaders and say yes, yes, yes but while they are actually saying something else in their hearts"

Furthermore, Nijera Kori utilizes positive discrimination when it comes to the hiring process to increase the number of female staff. Nijera Kori are also using their sub centers as a training ground for women leaders with the hope of them advancing further into leadership positions at the area and divisional centers. However, the low number of female coordinators on area and divisional levels indicates that

the transition to upper-level leadership is not easily made. And while the decision to have female leaders at the sub centre level came from the understanding that women leaders are required for the activities and organization to perform properly this discussion was also met with the questioning of why women should automatically become leaders if there were men who were more skilled. In this case, the deeply ingrained idea of Nijera Kori as an organization that not only works for women clashes with idea of positive discrimination as well as with patriarchal norms.

"This is an old discussion that is still going on and will continue in the future"

"Every staff comes from a different family so they have their own family culture and education so there are some male staff members with the mentality "we are the men" because this is a very common picture, a very common mentality"

While female leadership on the field remains a challenge, positive steps (as discussed above) have and are being taken. In 2008, it was decided that women needed to be included into the central cultural team as female staff and group members were already participating in the cultural activities. The stated goal of working for equal numbers of men and women in the central cultural team was therefore added to Nijera Kori's gender policy and then implemented, with today's central cultural team consisting of 2 men and 2 women.

"When I joined there was no female coordinator and I felt this was a challenge and I got the scope to see Khushi Appa closely and she asked me if I could take this challenge and I said yes I can do it"

The encouragement from senior staff has been instrumental in several of the staffs' stories about perusing leadership positions indicating the importance of an active support within the organization. The interviews have also highlighted the need for additional support for female staff at times of marriage and child birth as these are times when female staff is more likely to leave the organization.

"That is one of the challenges for women who actually have to leave family and also the family doesn't allow sometimes. The staff want to but the husband or family doesn't allow. Sometimes it work and sometimes it doesn't"

"Sometimes it happens that a deservable person leaves the job or that they don't to be leaders. Maybe they are nominated but the women themselves don't want to be leaders"

The social expectations of women in Bangladesh that pertains to family and motherhood and the commitment they themselves feel seem to be a contributing factor to the lack of female leaders within Nijera Kori. Because their roles are more bound to the interests of their children and family than men they might not want to take on the role of leaders as their role of mother and wife is deemed more or equally important or they simply lack the scope altogether (Miller and Razavi, 1995).

"The leadership role needs more dedication, like since the women have their involvement with their families and children or like you know. The men doesn't have that level of involvement that much so maybe that's why."

Organizational rules and policies

Maternity leave: permanent staff 6 months with pay, temporary staff 6 months without pay.

Paternity leave: No

Childcare: Both male and female staff members are allowed to bring and raise their child at the field offices till the age of 10 after which the child can remain if special permission is given.

Gender policy: Yes

Sexual harassment policy: Yes

Many of Nijera Kori's rules and policies (including those above) regarding gender issues can be found in their gender policy. Nijera Kori created the gender policy early on during its work because of the need for certain guidelines and rules when having a mixed workplace and due to their sensitive work, with the aim to create an equal opportunity organization.

Nijera Kori's gender policy places the encouragement of female participation on all levels of society squarely in the middle of creating a socially just society and therefore focuses on aspects of female leadership and representation within the organization. In addition, it specifies rules regarding maternity leave and child care provisions such as allowing women to bring child care helpers to meetings and trainings as well as keep the child with them for breastfeeding purposes. Both male and female staffs at the field centers are allowed to raise their children at the centers up until the age of 10 and longer with special permission. The policy also mentions an on-going training program encouraging staff member to treat their female co-workers with respect. However, paternity leave is not included. (Nijera Kori, 2014b).

Nijera Kori's sexual harassment guide lines are issued by the Bangladeshi high court and the guidelines given are valid for all work and educational institutions until a law concerning sexual harassment is adopted. The policy provides NK with a wide definition of sexual harassment, covering everything from physical and emotional harassment, direct and indirect harassment i.e. jokes and public graffiti in common areas, as well as the growing concern of cyber harassment. In addition it also defines harassment as exclusion from events on the basis of being a woman. It also covers disciplinary actions and procedures for bringing forward or withdrawing complaints. If a complaint is to be withdrawn the reason for doing so must be stated and included in the report. However the sexual harassment guide lines specifically and only defines women as potential victims for sexual harassment (High Court, 2009).

While no cases of men being victims of sexual harassment were known to the respondents they believed that male complaints would be treated in the same way as if it was a woman who filed a complaint. All respondents had extensive knowledge about the sexual harassment policy and knew how to file a complaint if needed.

Since any changes in policy and guidelines must come from the staff during the staff conventions, changes in these are dependent on an organizational culture in which staff members are encouraged to discuss and bring forward new ideas but also simply to know what is included in the policies. For example, it became clear that many of the respondents did not know or was unsure if male staff had the

same possibility to raise their children at the centers as female staff has. The reason for this may be that they don't know or remember the rules that are put forward in the gender policy but another explanation more likely, is that of social norms and expectations. An explanation that one of the respondents made a case for:

"The case of a staff member who wanted to resign because his wife was sick and needed to take care of his child. But the sub center persuaded him to not to resign because he needed to earn and provide for his family. None of the parties involved advised or asked him to bring the child to the center"

The lack of paternity leave and lack of knowledge among staff regarding the child care rules are troubling as it reinforces the role of women as the caregiver and the men as the bread-winner and maintains what Acker calls "gendered hierarchies". The notion of motherhood will be discussed further in the last part of this report.

Gender relations within Nijera Kori

While Nijera Kori's staff in the field centers live and work together in close proximity and have the same tasks and responsibilities there seem to be some rules and behavior that differ or used to differ between male and female staff. For example, female staff was initially expected to work mornings and afternoons while male staff also work evenings and nights, due to the safety aspect and conservative norms. In the KIT gender study from 2007 this was highly stressed, stating that the female staff did not participate in evening activities (KIT, 2007) However, at the Kumarkhali field office this is not the case and the safety concern resolved by the company of male staff members.

"Now when they join evening activities and it is hard to find a van coming back, we deal with the problem together and come back together. Before we didn't have this mindset which meant that women didn't usually go to evening meetings"

The female staff at the Kumarkhali field office actively takes part in evening group meetings as well as public events after dark. This change is not only a change in mentality but also out of necessity i.e. accompanying female group members to and from meetings or rehearsals. As well as the professional benefits for the staff and male group members that get additional perspectives in their discussions. However it is still not mandatory for the female staff to work during the evenings.

"Women don't need to go to the men's groups- this is a privilege"

Another seemingly gender-specific behavior and rule is that of modes of transportation. Male staff takes the bicycle to group meetings and other events while women get there by van or rikshaw, for which the female staff is remunerated by the organisation. Women's use of van or rikshaw is explained by respondent no. 6 in the following way:

"If they wear shalwar kameez the women will be considered as children and lose authority but if they wear sari they will be considered as social workers and it is not possible to ride the bicycle with the sari"

For Nijera Kori's female staff the sari is the mandated dress code while for the men the dress code stipulates dress-shirt and pants. Nijera Kori guidelines is that staff should wear clothes that is similar of the people they work with on the field in order to become *like one of them* and create close and cordial relationships. However a few female staff wearing shalwar kameez has been observed at both head office and field indicating some flexibility, primarily at the Dhaka head office.

While the existence of a dress code is nothing unusual for an organization like Nijera Kori the motivations and understandings behind it are more interesting. The men's clothes and dress code are discussed by many of the respondents in regards of practicality while the sari has both practical and symbolic explanations.

"But it's not only the sari it's also about shoes and ornaments. The poor will learn something based on what the staff wears and if they wear shalwar kameez with with narrow tights it won't be very much pleasant or decent for them"

The sari is motivated by several respondents as it is the Bengali traditional dress, in opposition to the shalwar kameez as foreign. It is also explained in the terms of decency and respect, equal to that of the women in the villages. For younger female staff it is a way of gaining respect and a sense of authority when working with older women and men. In addition, the sari may prevent incidents of eve-teasing and sexual harassment when working in the field. However, the sari is considered somewhat impractical for field work as it is hard to move around in and restricts the female staff's mobility.

While most of the female respondents spoken to are positive to the sari, from a gender perspective it has some interesting consequences and reveals challenges that pertain mostly to women. By mandating the use of the sari, Nijera Kori has created a disadvantage for their female staff as they need to use modes of transportation run by others, therefore limiting their female staff's mobility and independence. The interviews also shines a light on the issue of safety and possibility of eve-teasing that female staff has to face working outside of the office and on the field. Furthermore, by referring to the sari as a Bengali symbol the female staff is tasked with not only being symbols of decency but also symbols and carriers of Bengali culture. The male equivalent of the sari, the punjabi and the lungi, on the other hand are always discounted on the count of being impractical.

Staff interaction and division of labor

Despite the institutional interventions discussed above, some areas in which gender inequalities persist among staff have been observed. Despite equal opportunities for male and female staff to participate in all activities a tendency among male staff to dominate meetings and activities have been observed. This was sometimes done by speaking loudly and by interrupting others, while in other cases it seemed to be the result of some kind of pre-determined process. For example during the activities that included cultural elements and an audience, events were almost exclusively controlled by male staff while the female staff often sat silently in the audience. The same pattern was also observed during the basic training for group members at the Khulna divisional center.

Staff perceptions

Nijera Kori's perception of gender as seen in their mission statement as well as in the implementation of the Access program clearly indicates their commitment to gender mainstreaming in their work with the poor. However early on in my report it was also stated to me that Access program should not only be viewed as a small program in terms of funding but

"as a concept and as a political struggle, It's a concept that we struggle with ourselves, within our activities, our approach and within our community, by only viewing it as a small program the meaning may entirely be lost".

This part of the report will therefore look more closely at the staff and what changes working for Nijera Kori might entail as well as look a bit more closely on how they perceive and discuss motherhood, feminism and gender equality in their own lives.

Working for Nijera Kori

“Joining Nijera Kori was a dream”

“I am working for Nijera Kori because it's a good job, not in a professional way but what it actually do in society”

For many of the respondents, working for Nijera Kori is something bigger than just a job. Although the reasons for initially joining the organization differed: some simply needed a job, while others had been in contact with the organization before and became impressed and for some it had been a lifelong dream. No matter the beginning all are now fully committed to the vision of the organization and few of the respondents had applied to any other work since joining Nijera Kori.

“Here, I have the opportunity to work, to stand up with the general people, the mass people and also speak about equality between men and women and the rights”

Many of the respondents come from humble beginnings themselves and view the work with Nijera Kori as a way to stand in solidarity with the poor in Bangladesh and as a kind of social service and social work.

“As Nijera Kori speaks about the poor people and I as well is a poor person that's why I'll stay and why I am here”

“Impressed by the work with poor people as I myself is one of them. I consider this work as a kind of social service”

Working and living at the field offices

Nijera Kori is a special organization in that staffs who work in the field both live and work at the centres together and only spend between 1-2 months with their families. This of course has a huge impact on their personal lives but also on their work. While most of the negatives apply to their personal sphere, the positive applies to the work. A sacrifice all of them seem willing to make.

“Living at the field office was extremely hard in the beginning, being separated from my family and children”

“It feels good that we are staying together because we can have an instant discussion on different subjects when necessary. We discuss and share thoughts and experiences which mean that we can spread more knowledge on the field level”

While some field offices of Nijera Kori consist only of men (9) most of them (22), just like Kumarkhali, have both male and female staff. It is uncommon to have un-married and unrelated men and women living under the same roof in a conservative setting such as Bangladesh but the idea of being role models in society in terms of gender equality is felt strongly by several of the staff members.

“Since we are working for gender equality, if there is no gender equality within us how can we establish it among other people? So we need first to establish equality among us”

When staff first joins Nijera Kori they are placed at a sub centre at which they are introduced and trained in the activities and goals of the organization. As the sub centres are usually led by women, this introduction also potentially works as a sort of schooling for those who join Nijera Kori with a more conservative view on women and leadership.

"There are some male staff with the mentality that "we are the men". However the number here are less because the sub centres are controlled by women so those who have that type of mentality can't work for a long time in those sub centres"

Having both male and female staff at the field offices is important as the process of working side by side with a member of the opposite sex increases the internalization of gender equal relationships both professionally and privately. In a conservative and patriarchal society such as Bangladesh the importance of this cannot be understated.

"It becomes a habit to listen to, respect and treat women equally"

Apart from the beneficial nature of Nijera Kori's work for the poor, many of the respondents also stress the impact the work has had on both themselves as individuals and also in their relationships and families. The change is often described in practical terms as in helping out at home with everything from washing and preparing food, but also in more strategic aspects as in issues of decision-making and valuing of their opinions, with the female staff more often focusing on strategic needs and the male staff on practical needs.

"Even though I stay here, my family consults with me about every decision affecting the family"

"Before, I used to buy fish at the market but my wife had to clean it and arrange for it to be preserved properly but now I take care of it all"

Feminism

"Feminism is speaking everything female, giving them more importance. Nijera Kori is not feminist because we are working with equality not only with the women. We speak about women and men both. Feminism is not very good, it's not a good aspect of equality"

The interviews with the respondents also show that they have an ambivalent and/or negative relationship with feminism. While 4 out of 7 respondents could see correlations between work for gender equality and feminism in terms of both looking at women's rights, violence against women and advancing women's position in society only 1 respondent would call him/herself a feminist.

This is interesting as the similarities between many feminist movements and the work of Nijera Kori are plenty. Bhasin and Khan (1999) for example list "*dowry, violence against women, rape, equal wages, discriminatory personal laws, the use of religion to oppress women and negative portrayal of women in media*" as modern feminist issues in south Asia today. These are all issues, except maybe the last one, that Nijera Kori works with everyday. Despite this, only one respondent would call him/herself feminist or aspects of Nijera Kori's work feminist. In addition, despite Bhasin and Khan's list of issues above clearly originate from local and current issues in countries such as Bangladesh, one respondent believed that feminism was not applicable to the Bangladeshi context.

"Feminists want the same rights and opportunities as men, for example a woman should be able to walk outside at midnight. But in our country it is not possible due to our social environment and system. But it is possible in, if it happens in Sweden or Japan."

Furthermore, if feminism is understood as "*an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general and conscious action by women and men to transform the*

present situation” (Bhasin & Khan, 1999) then why are the staff members of Nijera Kori so negatively inclined towards feminism?

“There is feminism that is about equality and then there is feminism like Taslima Nasrin”

The respondents’ strong focus on what they call “rough feminism” has led to an understanding of feminism as being opposite or contradictory to gender equality and as foreign. Rough feminism, they believe, work only with women’s rights and empowerment in order to create a women dominated society. A commonly held view that reflects either a total misunderstanding of what feminism stands for or an attempt to discredit it according to Bhasin & Khan (1999). Rough feminism is in many interviews exemplified by the author and activist Taslima Nasrin who they say crosses the line (a line few was able to define) but also because she makes indecent suggestions of what women’s empowerment entail.

“Now men can pee on the road and she said that women should be able to do this too. And we don’t want that kind of situation”

Negative perceptions and attitudes against feminism and feminists are common and to be expected, as feminism challenge that which is the closest to us, our families and our values and beliefs (Bhasin & Khan, 1999). However, the religious, conservative and capitalist backlash against feminism (Bhasin & Khan, 1999) seems to have made it hard for the respondents to see the similarities and contributions feminists and the feminist movements may bring to the staffs own work.

Motherhood and fathers

Gender issues are inherently personal issues as they force individuals to not only address external institutions such as schools and state but also asks them to question their own relationships as well as belief and value systems (Bhasin & Khan). Throughout the interviews, existing social norms and expectations concerning the reproductive roles appear very strong and both male and female respondents with and without children championed women’s superior ability to raise children.

“Women raise the children more well than men so it’s only natural that they stay with their mother”

“I can teach them well but taking care of them and feeding them can be done more perfectly by their mother”

The strength of this norm is evident since most of the respondents did not seem to reflect over their own statements at all and with one of the respondents even turning to the physical aspects as a possible explanation. Even a respondent who believed the supremacy of women as parents had become a problem deferred to naturalness and physical aspects.

“In our country, generally, the children live with their mother so it has become some kind of rule...It is a problem that is has become like rule but it is because they bear the child, feed it and raise them mostly and because I live here far away from family I will be less able to take care of the child”

According to Bhasin and Khan (1999) are women’s and men’s tendency to view motherhood as something natural the result of two things: the glorification of motherhood and the lack of alternatives. Leading to a situation in which women and men accepts roles that confines and immobilizes them in different ways, as seen above in the discussion concerning female leadership for example. However these patriarchal notions of mothers and fathers i.e. gender roles also deny the male staff the opportunity to care for their children and build close relationships with them as seen in the discussion above concerning child care rules (Bhasin & Khan, 1999).

Conclusion and Recommendations

"The work we do here with Nijera Kori is a continuously process, we learn every day"

Working with gender and gender equality is difficult because it concerns that which is personal. For an organization such as Nijera Kori that works in a conservative and patriarchal setting this challenge is made even harder and that much more important. In order to spread their vision of a gender equal and extortion free society it is imperative that the organization itself embody these qualities. Nijera Kori has the possibility to be a truly transformative force in the lives of their staff and group members and in many cases already are. By building a deeper understanding of gender and gender roles among its staff as well as a critical understating of social norms pertaining to men and women this transformation can progress further. As an organization Nijera Kori can provide a framework in which new ideas and roles can be tested and encouraged as well as create or amend policies that work towards the goal of a gender equal organization. This can only be achieved if the organization as a whole makes a genuine attempt to critically reflect over their own role in perpetuating gender inequalities inside the organization and in society.

Capacity building

- Evaluate existing training programs in order to strengthen the gender perspective and the understanding of gender roles.
- Provide continuous trainings, workshops or other to deepen and widen the staff's understanding of gender in order to ensure a progressive implementation on the field level.
- Utilize the schooling sessions to discuss on current lines of thoughts in gender and feminist research to raise awareness and further discussions.

Female leadership

- Increase support for women who are getting married and having children to ensure their continued employment.
- Create a 50-50 % policy for leadership roles on divisional and area level in Nijera Kori in order to deal with the low representation of female leaders.

Policy

- Include paid paternity leave in the gender policy as an important marker that men are also capable of taking care of children.
- Ensure the continuous distribution of all policies to staff.

Lead by example

- Discourage domineering behavior among staff in which individuals silence or over-power others by speaking loudly, waving their hands in their face and making the shhhh sound.

- Encourage female staff to take charge of and lead public events and create space within the team and organization in which they can do so.

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Appendix I

The respondents was asked a selection of the questions below, all interviews except for two were made with an interpreter.

Interview guide

Biography information concerning educational and work background as well as family and years of employment at Nijera Kori.

- Why did you start working for Nijera Kori?
- Why do you stay at Nijera Kori?

Introduction to the part of the interviews regarding concepts

- What is gender equality?
- Why is working with gender equality important?
- What does the concept of gender mean?
- What is feminism to you?
- Is Nijera Kori a feminist organization?
- Would you call yourself a feminist?
- What kind of education have you received within Nijera Kori on the issue of gender?

The work place

- How are decisions made at your work place?
- Do you feel comfortable to express feelings and opinions among colleagues and senior staff?
- Are there any gender- specific rules at your work place?
- How do you feel about working with both women and men?
- How do feel about living at the field office?

Policies

- Have you read the gender policy?
- Do you know what is included in the Gender Policy?
- Have you read the sexual harassment guidelines and know the how to file a complaint if needed?
- Are you allowed to have your children stay at the field office?

Personal life

- Have you seen any changes in your personal life after joining Nijera Kori?
- Do you discuss the work you do with Nijera Kori with people when you are home and try to influence them?
- Did you have a discussion with your wife/husband about who would raise the child/children?

Leadership

- How is it being a female coordinator/leader in Nijera Kori?
- Why do you think there are so few female leaders?
- How are leaders elected?
- Has there been any change during the time you have been working at Nijera Kori?
- What can Nijera Kori do to improve the gender balance among its leadership?