

Nijera Kori – Gender Case Study

**Final Draft incorporating feedback from Nijera Kori, Tanja
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Providing services to poor people can only be a short term solution to the symptoms of poverty, and fails to address the causes. Instead, poor people must become aware of their rights and gain the collective strength to fight for these and to challenge social injustice. This is the Nijera Kori (NK) philosophy. NK has for over twenty years been organising poor and landless people into activist groups. Members and groups support each other to fight for the rights to which they are legally entitled, such as free education and medical care, access to the legal system, and land allotted under land reform schemes. They are given no financial support, but pool their own savings and undertake collective economic enterprises such as farming or small business. Opposition has been intense from local elites and religious fundamentalists who are now on the rise. Three NK landless activists have been killed during the twenty year struggle, the most recent in 2000. Nevertheless the landless groups continue, and in some areas have reached a critical mass and achieved genuine changes.

NK sees women and men as oppressed by the same economic system and as needing to work together to challenge both gender and other inequalities. NK programme organisers live collectively in subcentres in the villages, with women and men sharing decision making and housework responsibilities practising equality in their own lives. This is a radical challenge to a society where most people have no option other than to live in marriages and extended families, and where shame is associated with interactions between women and men. Women living and working without male guardians become agents for change and role models for other women. At the same time, in part because of the collective living arrangements, there are only half as many female as male staff. In response NK is making special efforts to recruit women.

Along with the philosophy of working together, is the recognition that separate spaces are needed to foster women's confidence and leadership. Landless people's groups are single sex, and trainings are alternately single and mixed sex at different levels. On elected bodies, seats are reserved for women if a minimum number of women are not otherwise elected. More landless women's groups have been organised than men's, because women have more time in the day time, are less likely to migrate, and are more oppressed so may be more willing to take the risk of organising. Groups challenge exploitation from both outside and inside the family and community including such problems as domestic violence and dowry.

There are important lessons to learn from NK. Mainstreaming of gender, and separate spaces for women are both needed. Cultures must be changed, and decades of time invested. Values of human rights and equality need to be applied consistently throughout both programme and internal practices. Even then, some challenges and inequalities will remain. At the same time, these strategies will open possibilities for amazing and tangible progress.

1. INTRODUCTION

We are building a new society

– Achhiron Begum, landless woman activist in Shaghata

After the famine of 1974, many destitute rural women made their way to the cities in search of food and work. Some women activists in Dhaka trained some of these women in food processing so they were able to generate income. Gradually this activity coalesced into an organisation called 'Nijera Kori' which means in English 'We do it ourselves'. In 1980, a disillusionment with the service provision approach of many NGOs brought about a shift in Nijera Kori (henceforth NK) to its current focus. Service provision and microcredit were seen to foster dependency and to address only the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty. Instead NK adopted a strategy of raising awareness of rights and helping people develop the collective strength to demand these rights and challenge injustice.

NK now organises poor rural people into activist groups, as part of a larger elected organisation. Members and groups support each other to fight for their rights. They are given no financial support, but pool their own savings, and undertake collective economic enterprises such as farming or small business.

In a few areas, such as Shaghata, where NK groups have been organised for over two decades, a critical mass has been reached. In these areas, a new society is being built from the grassroots up. Poor people are succeeding in gaining access to the land, wages, schooling, medical and legal services to which they are entitled by law but which they have so far been denied. Through their collective strength they are overcoming the immediate opposition from local elites, religious fundamentalists, and government administration. They are also changing their own behaviours - intervening when men beat their wives, and arranging dowry free marriages between each other's children.

The new society is not only an aim of the programme. Staff also live out this new society 'practising equality' in their own lives. In Bangladesh marriage is virtually an obligation, and divorce means social and economic death for most women. Outside marriage and the family, contact between women and men is often restricted. However, instead of living with spouses in the extended family, NK programme organisers live collectively in subcentres, with women and men sharing living space, decision making and household tasks. While most staff are married, they spend at least 10 months a year in subcentres rather than with their families, although children under ten may join them in the subcentres. This provides a radical alternative to family lifestyles. Many staff and their partners and families experience this as a big sacrifice of family life. However, collective living arrangements are also described in highly

positive terms, and for some, particularly those with difficult relations with their spouses, or situations of divorce or violence from husbands, NK provides vital security and freedom.

Participatory democracy is part of the organisation's philosophy and function. Poor people's groups elect group leaders and representatives to form committees at village and higher levels. Staff also elect their representatives and higher levels of leadership.

A revolutionary vision of collective and democratic struggle for human rights and equality binds the groups and the staff into a consistent whole.

This case study explores the NK approach to gender. The following section 2 outlines the gender strategy. Section 3 describes the core NK activity, organising landless groups, and considers the gender aspects of these. Section 4 looks at gender implications of human resource practices in the organisation. Finally, section 5 reflects on lessons to be learned from NK.

2. OUTLINE OF GENDER STRATEGY

Both women and men are poor and exploited, so we should work together and think jointly.

- Men's group member Shaghata area

The Nijeri Kori philosophy is that poor women and men have common interests, and are exploited by the same system. This philosophy generates a gender strategy which emphasises creating ways for women and men to work together in greater equality, in contrast to the sex segregated and unequal society in which they live. Staff collective living arrangements reflect this philosophy. The mainstreaming of gender in recruitment, performance evaluation, and content of group discussion and training, also reflects this integrationist approach.

At the same time, the need for single sex spaces, particularly for women, is recognised as highly necessary, and built into the programme. NK's core activity is organising landless people's groups, which are single sex (although male staff may help female staff organise women's groups, and vice versa). Only at a higher level of elected committees do landless men and women participate in the same group. Similarly, training for group members at a most basic level is single sex, and only later are trainings mixed. On elected bodies for both group members and staff, seats are reserved for women if a minimum number of women are not otherwise elected.

The table below outlines NK achievements in relation to gender, the challenges remaining, and strategies used to tackle these. Sections 3 and 4 explore these in more detail.

NK Gender issues

	Achievements	Challenges	Strategies
Whole organisation	<p>Consistency in values and practices between programme and staff, common vision of collective struggle for human rights and equality, including an end to women's exploitation</p> <p>Breaking stereotypes of how women and men should relate to each other</p>	<p>Patriarchal system</p> <p>Rise in religious fundamentalist activities at grassroots and other levels</p> <p>Shame associated with interactions between women and men, and in women being active in the public sphere</p>	<p>Philosophy of women and men's common interests and common exploitation</p> <p>Gender mainstreaming throughout procedures and processes</p> <p>Strategic creation of mixed and single sex spaces</p>
Landless groups	<p>More women's groups formed than men's groups</p> <p>Successful organising by women's and men's groups for women's rights eg. Higher wages</p> <p>Some community and family gender norms have changed eg. Less domestic violence</p> <p>Women and men group members have pooled economic resources to raise standard of living</p> <p>Women and men group members take part in democratic landless group structures</p> <p>Women and men group members engage with local, national and international politics. Women and men group members are invited to take part in local village councils (shalishes)</p> <p>Cultural groups educate on women's exploitation</p>	<p>Men's groups less likely to take up these issues than women's groups, especially where NK is not so strong in the area</p> <p>Men's groups still on average have more resources than women's groups</p> <p>Fewer women elected than men</p> <p>Women less engaged, and fewer women elected to government positions than men</p> <p>Very few women in cultural groups</p>	<p>Continue to address women's exploitation in training and group discussions</p> <p>Women's groups encouraged to buy land and campaign for higher wages</p> <p>Reserved seats for women, foster women's leadership through single sex training</p> <p>Foster women's leadership through single sex training</p> <p>Groups making efforts to recruit more women</p>
Staff	<p>Staff cultural teams educate on women's exploitation</p> <p>Collective living creates</p>	<p>Cultural teams men only due to sexual harassment of women when they travel as performers</p> <p>Twice as many male</p>	<p>Sensitising men for positive change as well as encouraging women to be more active in cultural activities</p> <p>Adjusting living</p>

	space for women and men to live in equality and an alternative to family life. Women living and working in an NGO without male guardians become agents for change and role models for other women.	staff as female staff, some women deterred by collective living in remote areas	conditions to make more acceptable to women, recruitment drives focussed on women
	Democratic election of management and higher level leadership	More male staff at middle level management	Reserved seats for women, women's leadership training
	Spaces for children in the workplace	Attitude that mothers rather than fathers are responsible for children	Continue discussion of gender roles

3. LANDLESS PEOPLE'S GROUPS

The NK philosophy is that through collective organising the landless can gain strength to assert their rights and escape poverty. This is recognised as a long-term and difficult battle. Exploitation of women is seen as an integral part of the larger framework of exploitation to be resisted. The issue is thoroughly mainstreamed into organising and training of landless groups. Most statistics are gender disaggregated and gender indicators for group performance are included such as number of successful protests organised on violence against women and dowry.

3.1 Organising groups

NK's core activity is organising the poor and landless¹ into single sex groups of 16-30 people. Out of this innocent beginning comes momentous change. After two or three months, groups can organise their own meetings without NK staff help. Later, they can help organise other groups.

Groups meet weekly for an hour or so, and decide actions by consensus. Where agreement is not forthcoming, decisions are sometimes reached only after extensive discussion running over several meetings, and possibly with the advice of staff or village or other committee members.

A typical weekly meeting

¹ The target group is those who are dependant on physical labour as their main source of livelihood, such as wage labourers, sharecroppers, small and marginal farmers, and other vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities, fisher folk, weavers, blacksmiths, barbers, cobblers, potters, small traders etc. Some of these may have a little land for the homestead or agriculture, but that amount of land does not satisfy their basic needs. Usually NK defines people of this economic level as 'landless'.

Opens with a 'mass song' about land or wealth exploitation, debt exploitation by moneylending NGOs, dowry torture etc.

The Group president opens the meeting

The Secretary (necessarily someone literate) reads minutes from the previous meeting, which are approved by applause from the group

The agenda is collectively set by all members

Brief discussion of theoretical issues – exploitation, may include national, international issues, news items

Discussion of practical issues – eg organising campaign events, resolving local conflicts

The treasurer reports on savings and economic activities, management of these may be discussed, savings collected.

The meeting is closed with another 'mass song'

Currently there are more women's groups than men's groups. This has not been a deliberate strategy but is likely to be a result of the following: men work in fields all day, so staff can only sit with them at night, while women are more available during the day; men's seasonal out migration; and women are more oppressed so may be more inclined to take the risk of organising.

Numbers of female and male groups organised

	Number of groups formed	Number of group members
Female	5,567	110,956
Male	4,486	100,626
Total	10,053	211,582

(figures as of December 2003)

Some groups include both Muslims and Hindus, others are only one or the other, but work with other groups across these differences. As one member of a mixed Muslim- Hindu women's group said 'we may have different religions, but we're all exploited by the same economic system'.

Once two thirds of the poor and landless people in the village are participating in such groups, a village committee is formed. Committee members are elected, and are mixed men and women. As women are less frequently elected, a minimum of seats are reserved for women candidates at each level. A similar system is adopted for the committees of the larger areas of Union and Thana. If a critical mass, but not yet a two thirds majority have joined groups, an area committee is formed. The number of women elected is increasing year by year, as can be seen in the tables below.

Numbers of women and men elected to committees

	Village Committee	Union Committee	Thana Committee	Area Committee
Women openly elected	76	19	6	13
Women elected to reserved seats	326	57	8	48
Total women elected	402	76	14	61
Total men elected	739	171	28	203
Percentage of women elected in open seats against the total number of men	10.28%	11.11%	21.42%	6.40%
Total	1141	247	42	264

(Annual report, April 2003-March 2003)

Year 2001-2002	Village Committee	Union Committee	Thana Committee	Area Committee
Women openly elected	61	12	3	9
Total men elected	574	148	31	207
Percentage of women elected in open seats against the total number of men	10.63%	8.11%	9.60%	4.35%

Note: The total number of women openly elected is 8.85% against the total number of elected men in the year 2001-2002.

Year 2000-2001	Village Committee	Union Committee	Thana Committee	Area Committee
Women openly elected	47	9	2	8
Total men elected	578	151	32	235
Percentage of women elected in open seats against the total number of men	8.13%	5.96%	6.25%	3.40%

Note: The total number of women openly elected is 6.62% against the total number of elected men in the year 2000-2001.

3.2 Training

Group members are supported with training². Training includes some aspects of how to organise and practical skills, but a large part focuses on analysing causes of poverty, and class exploitation, drawing heavily on examples from participants' own realm of experience. All levels of training include modules and discussions of women and women's rights.

Training is at different levels, alternately single and mixed sex, the logic being that women need separate spaces to gain confidence, but at the same time women and men need to learn to interact. Men need to learn to respect women, and women to assert themselves with men.

Core training³

Basic level (3 days) – women/men separate
Advanced (4 days) – women and men together – after a few years of group membership
Higher selection (5 days) – separate
Higher (10 days) mixed – for highest level group leaders

Higher selection training deals with broader national and international issues, which women have less opportunity to engage with and less confidence in, so once again this training is separate.

In addition to this core training, special courses are run on leadership development, joint production and management, rights and access to information, paralegal, and sustainable development training.

The main activities of groups consist of: mobilising to claim rights for both women and men; resolving local conflicts, including family conflicts from which women often suffer most;

² Trainees are selected by the group from among the group members through discussion among themselves in group meeting. They select participants considering the criteria of: participants' level of consciousness, commitment to the group, gender sensitivity, leadership and learning capacity. Only in case of Higher Training participants are selected by the Central Training Cell in consultation with the Divisional Trainers. Usually there is no drop out from training. However, due to unavoidable reasons such as migration for employment, river erosion, pressure from vested interests, false cases etc. some group members selected for the training may not be able to take part.

³ Duration of core trainings is as follows: Basic level 3 days, Advanced level 4 days, Higher Selection level 4 days and Higher level 10 days. After training both women and men participants bear the following responsibilities: apply the lessons learned from the training in personal and social life; discuss learning of the training with other fellow group members; organise other landless people; identify local issues and organise movements around these; conduct cultural activities and increase intra-group cooperation; form a Training Forum with other participants of NK trainings who sit on a monthly basis to plan above activities; organise refresher trainings in their own village.

undertaking a collective economic enterprises; fostering an identification with and participation in local, national and international issues.

3.3 Claiming rights from state and society

Once the organisation is strong enough, groups mobilise around their human rights. These include the following rights which are guaranteed by national law but in practice rarely implemented.

- Possession of 'khas' land and water bodies allotted to landless people under land reform policies
- Minimum wages for a day's labour
- Medical treatment which should be free in government hospitals but is often poor quality or totally denied to poor people
- Schooling which is often denied to poor children
- Constitutional protection of minorities
- Police stations and courts accepting cases filed by poor people, which they usually refuse

Opposition has been fierce from local elites, religious fundamentalists, government administration, and shrimp business managers, sometimes working together to obstruct group actions. Three group members have even been killed during the struggles, Korunamoyee Sarder in 1990, Kachmoti Begum in 1998, and Joynal Abedin in 2000. In part due to this kind of courage and willingness to take risks, significant achievements have been made. For example, from March 2002- March 2003, 562 group members regained 229,72 acres of khas agricultural land by defeating illegal usurpers, a more than 10% increase over the previous year. Khas land deeds are in the name of both women and men family members. Most group members' children now go to school, and the groups have established schools in areas where government education facilities are not available.

Rights entitled under Islamic law are also demanded. For example under Islamic law, women are entitled to a share of inheritance if her husband or father dies, which is half that to which sons are entitled. However, women are often denied even this share. Group members have organised shalishes – customary village justice hearings - to enforce this right.

Campaigns are also run against injustice including: violence against women; commercial export oriented shrimp aquaculture which destroys' people's land and the benefits from which are denied to poor people; and globalisation's negative impacts on the rural poor.

Campaigns have also been run for higher wages for women. Women are typically paid less than men, however this has been a difficult issue to tackle, as some women fear if they ask for equal wages with men, men will be employed in preference to them. Unemployment is a

problem, and agricultural producers do not necessarily have high profit margins. Nevertheless, NK staff are encouraging groups to discuss this issue, and in some cases NK groups have mobilised successfully for higher wages for women.

Fighting for higher wages for women

In one village in Palashbari several groups, 13 men's groups and 7 women's groups are organised. Most of the women are domestic labourers, working for richer families in the household, including processing agricultural products and tending livestock. They work from sunrise to sunset during the harvest season, and previously received for this labour a little breakfast, a small bowl of rice with water for lunch, and one kilogram of rice per day, which is not enough to feed their families. Through group discussions and training they realised they were exploited. Out of their common problem arose a common idea to do something about it. They learnt that the law specifies that minimum return for a day's labour is three and a half kilograms of rice or cash equivalent. The 13 women's groups and 7 men's groups in their village in 2001 got together and demanded from employers two kilograms of rice and two meals per day, less than their legal entitlement, but they thought a more realistic demand. Employers refused, so they went on strike and refused to work. People came from elsewhere to take up their jobs, but the group members put them off saying (in the words of one women's group member) 'this is our place. It is our right to work here. We won't allow anyone else to work here. We're poor, you are poor. Don't fight us.' This was effective, and after a period, when crops were getting rotten, the employers called them in and conceded to their demand. This has also had a positive effect on surrounding villages where the day's wage for such work has also been increased. Men supported them, because if women's wage is raised, this helps the whole family, and because most of their husbands are also group members. However, they say the employers are resentful, and still lack respect for them (story as told by one women's group of Palashbari).

Fighting for more equal wages for women and men

Until last year in Shaghata women agricultural labourers earned 30 taka/day as opposed to the 40 taka men received. Rahima, union committee member, said this isn't fair as women in fact work as hard as men, and don't take the smoking break that men take. This became an issue after she and others went to meetings and trainings on labour-wage exploitation. This inequality was discussed in group, training, and Thana, Forum and Union committee meetings. All agreed that both women and men would stop work and demand an equal wage of 40 taka for both women and men. Men supported the action because a higher wage for women is good for the whole family, and also this could stop women undercutting them in the labour market. In early 2004, they went on strike and prevented outside labourers from taking up the work. Because the organisation is strong they were able to do this, and landowners unlike on previous occasions did not threaten violence, knowing the strength of the organisation. Instead the landowners bargained with the organisation, and finally agreed on 35 taka/day for women (story as told by Rahima, NK Thana committee member).

3.4 Changing own families and communities

Groups not only challenge exploitation by the more powerful sections of community and society, but also exploitation between each other, in local communities and within the family – where women particularly are affected. Dowry, divorce, polygamy, child marriage, wife beating, rape, restrictions on women’s mobility, and preference for boy children are all discussed and dealt with by both women and men’s groups, although more often by the former, who may initiate support from men’s groups. Divorce may mean social and economic death for women, and group members try to dissuade men from divorcing their wives. Dowry – asked from women’s families upon marriage is particularly damaging to women’s status. Girl children are unwelcome because families know that a daughter will cost them while a son will bring money into the family upon marriage. New brides are often pressured to continue asking for money from their families after marriage, and tortured by new husbands or mother in laws if they refuse to do so. In Shaghata, with a high level of NK membership, group members commonly arrange marriages between each other’s children to avoid dowry. In other areas, dowry may be more difficult to resist. While it is possible not to take dowry for sons, it may be difficult to get daughters married without it.

In one year groups organised a total of 400 movements on issues like dowry, divorce, polygamy, rape, fatwa and other fundamentalist sanctioned violence against women, as well as on microcredit and exploitative money lending (Annual Report, 2002-2003).

Mobilising against domestic violence

Although group members learn about exploitation of women, one male group member could not apply what he learnt. He had a bad temper which he took out on his wife by beating her. He knew she depended on him and could not leave him, and saw her as his property. Women group members came to Jasim, the president of the local NK thana committee, saying they had heard this group member beating his wife, and that if they didn’t intervene urgently, she might end up being killed by him. When Jasim heard this, he and his wife called some women and men group members to sit together and discuss what to do. They immediately called a ‘shalish’ attended by 50 people, both women and men, in which they threatened the man that if he did not stop beating his wife he would be punished. After this, the man still sometimes is aggressive towards his wife, but no longer inflicts physical violence. She had previously not been interested in joining a group herself, but after this intervention by groups on her behalf, she joined a NK women’s group, which gave her greater strength to defend herself against her husband (story as told by Jasim, Thana committee president).

Family dynamics may become more mutual and egalitarian. One men’s group member asserts ‘both women and men are poor and exploited, so we should work together and think jointly’ including sharing decision making with one’s wife.

Changing attitudes – overcoming family resistance

Rahima, now a widow, first joined a group in 1988. Fundamentalists came and talked to her sons and said women should stay at home, you should stop your mother behaving this way. Her sons used to try to stop her organising, but she persisted, getting strength and advice from the group and NK staff. Now her sons have joined mens' groups, and their wives have joined women's groups. They give her more respect, food, and do more work in the house. Rahima has now become a group leader, and a member of the village and Thana committee. She feels a constant anxiety that society needs to be changed, and things need to be done. She's become an activist (as told by Rahima, NK Thana Committee member).

Group members meet resistance not only from the family, but also from immediate communities. They challenge both themselves and others in dealing with this opposition.

Changing family and community dynamics

(Story from interviews with group leader and Union Parishad (local government) elected member Achhiron Begum and her husband, Thana Committee President Jasim.)

Achhiron: 23 years ago, a NK staff member moved in with her family for four years, mobilising in her area. He encouraged her to start a woman's group. She thought that was impossible, women don't go out of doors, and besides she was shy. But when she learnt about her history and the causes of poverty she was persuaded. Only a couple of women in each village agreed to join, so they started a group which included women from a large area. Villagers would interrupt their meetings, asking why they were talking with a man (the male staff member). So they started meeting covertly in members' houses, and posting someone to keep watch at the door and stop anyone coming in. Village leaders would still harass them and she met with society's disapproval, but she says 'we are building a new society'.

Jasim first joined a group in 1980 and gradually through discussion he started to gain awareness and know about rights. He didn't used to like his wife going out of the house and interacting with people, but through participation in the group he has changed his views. With group support he was elected to local government as UP (Union Parishad - local government) member. When he stood down after two terms his wife was persuaded to stand for the post. He is proud of her and says he never imagined either of them were capable of this.

Acchiron is the first landless woman elected to the UP in her area. She now has the strength to talk in public, protest, go anywhere, move anywhere, participate in shalish, understand public functions and fight for public good. Now, she doesn't even give people a chance to criticise her. Once, upon hearing that a fundamentalist man had criticised her, she went to his

house with 12 other women and confronted him. He said 'why do you behave like that, going out and giving strident speeches in public?'. She said 'I'll keep doing this a hundred times over so you better get used to it.' He eventually apologised. Male group members heard about the man and asked her if she needed them to go sort him out. She replied she had already resolved the situation.

Jasim: Family relations have also changed. Jasim says he does some housework ('tell the truth!' threatened the interpreter, 'we'll be asking your wife later'). He collects water, cleans and sweeps, helps with the cooking, and looking after grandchildren. Some people say 'this work is for women, why are you doing this?' He says 'this work is too much for one person, women and men should share responsibility inside and outside the house'. Before joining the group they just acted 'like husband and wife'. Now they discuss and decide matters together. For example, Jasim consulted his wife on arranging his daughter's marriage, and his daughter was also given veto power over the choice of husband for her.

Challenging one's own community

Nanda Rani has been a member of NK group for 16 years now, and is the only elected female member of the 21 person Thana committee in Shaghata. She joined the group because her parents were members, so when she moved to her husband's village she started new groups, both Hindu and Muslim. She's Hindu by background, although she says she no longer has any religion. 'I am a human, that's my belief' she says. The leader of the village – a Hindu village - asked her 'Why are you doing this kind of organising? Why do you mix with Muslims?'. The community ostracised her, never inviting her to religious festivals, or to other people's homes, and refusing to talk to her or eat food she had cooked. This ostracism lasted about ten years. She was able to endure it because of support from her group and her husband, also a group member. Now many groups are organised in her village, and people are friendly again (from interview with Nanda Rani).

3.5 Undertaking collective economic enterprises

NK provides no financial or material resources to the groups. NK sees microcredit loans as fostering dependency, and amounting to another kind of exploitation akin to money lending, where people pay high interest, get into debt, and usually fail to prosper. Instead, group members themselves pool savings, each individual contributing one or two taka a week (about one or two pence), although savings may stop in times of hardship. With this money they undertake collective economic enterprises, most often buying or leasing land for agriculture or undertaking small business. Savings are also used for fisheries, livestock, rickshaws, or to lend to group members in times of need. Enterprises may be undertaken by one group, or several groups together, and are managed by committees selected by group members. One male group member in Shaghata described their position as agricultural

labourers: 'We are creators of wealth but have no control over it'. Through collective enterprises they regain control and reap the benefits of the wealth they produce.

In one year a total of 578 groups undertook new joint economic activities and earned a profit totalling over 4 million taka (Annual Report 2002-2003). However, of these 578 groups, 356 were male and 222 female. Women's groups savings and group economic activities are smaller and fewer than those of men's groups. Women's groups are less inclined to buy land, but NK is encouraging them to do so.

3.6 Participating in local government, the nation and the world

NK sees local, national and global exploitation as linked, such as the growing strength of the Muslim fundamentalists locally feeding off imperialist actions globally. NK allies with global campaigns for example against the export shrimp market.

In training and meetings group members discuss national and international issues which affect them, sometimes looking at a particular news item brought by a literate member of the group or NK staff. To build a larger awareness group members celebrate a number of local, national and international days. National days include those celebrating Bengali language, independence day, commemorating a minority woman who died in the struggle for independence against the British, commemorating a national woman's rights activist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain⁴. International days include international women's day, and international labour day. Through learning about the history of such celebrations, group members come to see themselves as engaged with and having a right to participate in and claim their due from the nation and the world. This engagement with the public realm and national and international affairs is particularly new for women.

Group members encourage each other to stand for local elections. In local government elections at union level from 2002-2003 111 male group members, and 77 female group members contested elections, of which 44 men and 40 women were elected (annual report 2002-2003). In one year a total of 387 group members, 338 men and 49 women were elected to 179 school management committees (annual report 2002-2003). These posts are important in that school management committees can ensure access to school for poor children. Although fewer women than men are elected, the number has increased since the previous rounds of elections.

3.7 Cultural groups

One aim of NK aim is to change culture – to forge a progressive Bengali culture in the face of exploitation, and in the face of influences from dominant external cultures – both from the

⁴ 21 February Language Day, 26 March Independence Day, 16 December Victory Day, 7 November Korunamoyee Martyr Day, 9 December Begum Rokeya Day

west but more immediately from Hindi pop culture from Bollywood and the like. Song and drama and song are a powerful tool in constructing this new culture. Drama audiences report reactions of pain, hatred and realisation and often discuss the content (source: interview with Shaghata cultural team leader Naiser Ali). Dramas end with an appeal to the audience: 'See what is happening! What will we do now? You sit silently but we need to struggle!'

Drama on oppression of women

Nurjahan divorced and so returned to her father's house. She was then ostracised by her community as a divorced woman. The leader of the village, an old man already married with children and grandchildren, decided he wanted to take her as a third wife. Nurjahan refused, and later married a young man. The village leader then persuaded the mullah to issue a fatwa against Nourhahan saying they should punish her. Villagers buried her up to her neck and stoned her until she was unconscious while her crying parents looked on. Nurjahan killed herself that night. This was a real story reported in the newspaper in the early 1990s. It was made into a drama by the landless cultural group.

Talent in performance is the criteria for membership of the cultural groups, which are selected by committees from landless group members locally, to perform for each other. Teams have been men only, due to the perception of women performers as being close to sex workers and fair game for harassment. However, as from last year drama groups have started trying to recruit women. Of a total of 611 team members, there are now 61 women. The practice in some areas has been to recruit only married women, often wives of men in the team, as it is thought that once married, husbands may stop their wives participating, so it is not worth investing the considerable time training unmarried women. This may be a mistake, and one of the reasons that cultural teams still include very few women. It also seems that in some cases attitudes by male cultural team leaders may be somewhat of a barrier, one stating that the lack of women is not such a problem as 'there are very few women's roles to play in their dramas anyway'.

4. NIJERA KORI STAFF

The staff set-up echoes the organisation of landless groups. A weekly staff meeting is held which, like landless group meetings, opens and closes with a mass song, covers both theoretical and practical issues, and has the same system of mutual reporting and accountability. As in the village, staff children pop in and out during the meeting and are shoed away. Like group members, staff have extensive opportunities for discussion and training, including on exploitation of women.

Staff also perform dramas in trainings and workshops, and a central cultural team is selected from the staff according to talent. At central level, the team became men only as the current

perception of women performers has meant the amount of sexual harassment was insurmountable for women travelling the country as performers.

Views on gender relations are considered in recruitment interviews. Terms of reference, and criteria for evaluation for all staff also include attention to work on women's exploitation, for which everyone is responsible.

One constraint NK has been unable to overcome is to reach greater parity of numbers of male and female staff. There are almost twice as many men as women staff.

Numbers of male and female staff

Total NK staff	324
Female	109
Male	215

(figures as of December 2003)

There are also fewer women than men in middle level management. Reasons include: lack of security and the related lesser freedom of movement for women; staff living in distant and remote areas in basic living conditions which lack privacy; requirement to live away from families. Previously staff lived with poor families, which was even more inhibiting for women. Many unmarried women join, but leave once married due to family opposition. Also, more senior women may leave once their children grow older as there are no good schools in NK areas. Staff at central office surmise that even in the most feminist and liberated households of NK staff women take more responsibility for children's education.

Attempts to increase numbers of women staff at all levels include: recruitment advertisements specifically for women; reserved seats for women in management committees; and more suited living centres. NK does not want to buy land if they can avoid it, but in some cases have decided it's worth it to be able to build a better living facility if they have the budget. A longer term strategy is to continue work on changing the world so women can have more say in the family and be more mobile, and security becomes less of a problem.

Staff contribute 1% of their salary to a solidarity fund for legal aid or medical treatment for group members. To remain close to those they work in living standard, their wages are low relative to other NGOs, which has sometimes proved a problem for retaining staff.

This consistency of values between staff and programme is further reflected in the collective living arrangements, accommodation of women's family burdens, and the democratic structure of the organisation.

4.1 Collective Living

All programme organisers, of which there are over 300, live collectively in sub centres, each with around 10-15 colleagues. They live here away from their families for at least 10 months a year (31 - 46 days annual leave is allowed, depending on distance from family). Family life is thought to interfere with work so people are deliberately posted away from their home areas, and where, as frequently occurs, programme organisers (POs) marry each other, they are posted apart after a period of time.

The collective living provides an opportunity for constant interaction with colleagues, both informally and in a once weekly half day subcentre meeting, as well as other get togethers as required. This fosters development of a common vision of human rights and social justice, and breaks down barriers of gender or cultural background (eg. Hindu or Muslim). However some differences persist, for example while men ride bicycles or motorbikes to their work areas, women usually walk or take rickshaws. Men are allowed to take rickshaws in case of ill-health or disability, and women are given the option of either bicycles or rickshaws. However, they rarely take up the bicycle option.

In some cases, safety is an additional reason for the living arrangements. Due to the radical programme of NK, entrenched local interests may threaten and harass staff. To avoid danger to families, and to put themselves in a better position to ensure their own safety, staff live in centres. For this reason, in 23 out of the total 50 subcentres, only male Programme organisers (POs) work, and subcentres are men only.

An attack on NK staff

In September 2002, Armed gangs attacked and almost killed staff in the gangni area subcentre, khulna division. A fatwa had been issued, and sanctioned by an influential quarter in the village, against the landless, who had resisted with the help of the staff. In response, armed gangs attacked staff. Villagers arrived and the armed gangs fled. And villagers subsequently protested the attack (Annual Report, 2002-2003).

Subcentre staff live in basic conditions, in or close to the areas they work. They mostly sleep two to a room. A cook usually works there, cooking the meals and doing the dishes. Staff clean their own rooms and wash their own clothes. The communal areas are cleaned collectively - more or less equally by women and men, most of the staff I spoke to assured me.

Normally (unless safety is a big issue) children are allowed to live in the centre with parents up to the age of 10, and exceptionally for longer. The parent pays a carer (usually a woman) to look after the child, or a relative may come daily or move into the centre, and space and a

bed is provided for children and carer. Children more often stay with mothers than fathers, the general view among staff still being 'children need their mothers when small'. Less frequently, and for shorter periods, men have taken their children with them, for example where both parents work for NK and there are two children, one may be with the mother, the other with the father. While children miss out on the extended family that would otherwise bring them up, they benefit from the attention of the many 'aunts' and 'uncles' they live with, and grow up instilled with the values of the organisation. Three girls, aged eight to twelve, who attended a workshop with their mothers, mimicked the workshop outcome of a drama with their own play on child rights!

This kind of collective living is quite revolutionary in the context, where people usually live with their parents until the inevitable marriage, often in relationships arranged by their parents. Outside marriage, interaction between women and men is limited. Staff say they enjoy living collectively, but also talk of living away from their families as a 'sacrifice' both for themselves and their family members back home. However, staff back home and their families? may also benefit from more enlightened attitudes. Male POs talk of sharing housework with wives once they go home, and how their relationships have become more two way, more equal in terms of decision making and mutual restrictions, due to what they have learnt at NK.

Riton Chandra Dey, young male PO, Shaghata subcentre, joined NK in 1998

We need collective living for this kind of work, to give space for sharing and joint thinking... When I first joined NK I felt awkward eating with the women staff and living in the same compound, but after only a couple of weeks I got used to it.

A year ago Riton's friends back home introduced a woman to him as a prospective bride. She and Riton liked each other, their parents approved the match, and after knowing each other two months they got married. She is a housewife and upon marriage moved to live with her parent in law, but often returns to stay with her own parents. Riton says he doesn't miss her too much as he's busy with work, and enjoys much talking, sharing and singing with the other staff, but it's harder on his wife, who is a housewife and new family member in his parent's household. Riton has said that 'of course' working with NK has changed his relationship with his wife. He shares stories of work with her, does some cleaning and washes his own clothes when he is at home. When Riton joined NK he saw it more as a job than a political commitment, but he has gradually come to see this as a life commitment instead (from interview with Riton).

This living arrangement also provides a vital and rare alternative for staff who don't want to be trapped in unhappy family situations, and would otherwise not be able to leave them. NK has supported several women staff escaping such situations, providing material, emotional and legal support for women staff who are trying to leave or divorce their husbands.

Fatima, woman PO and subcentre leader since 2000, Palashbari subcentre, joined NK in 1986

Fatima always had a keen sense of justice. When Fatima was a secondary school student she used to organise women in her village to protest against wife beating, dowry and harassment. The village leader was not happy with her behaviour and threatened her. One night, while she was asleep in her room with her aunt, people came in and threw acid on her and her aunty. She went to hospital, and the story was reported in the newspaper. Khushi Kabir, the NK coordinator, saw the article and went to find Fatima, offering her support in making the case against the accused who were subsequently condemned to jail for ten years. Fatima's home was totally unsafe, so she joined NK as a PO. She says the most precious thing NK has given her is security. While local elites and Muslim fundamentalists may threaten and harass staff, some protection is provided by the fact that women and men staff members live together and can help each other, and village group members will also help in case of danger.

When she first came to NK she saw that in contrast to discrimination against women, men and women were living and working together cooperatively. In her family she was not allowed to take part in any decision, but here she had an opportunity to participate. She also felt that there are so many problems for women in this society, that they can't be solved without working with men, who are both exploiters but many of whom are also exploited themselves. In NK, she found this idea could be applied.

After joining NK, Fatima's family arranged a marriage for her and called her home. She married the man, who turned out to be a fundamentalist Muslim and tried to stop her returning to work at NK. Fatima insisted, returning to NK when pregnant with her son. While she and her husband have not divorced, they are effectively separated and Fatima never returns to see him. Fatima's mother has also since died, so her son, now age 14, has exceptionally been allowed to stay with Fatima in the subcentre beyond the age of 10. He is provided a bed in her room, but also has space to share room with the male staff. She says everyone helps her look after her son, and bringing him up in this environment is no problem (from interview with Fatima).

4.2 Child spaces in the central office

The 28 central office staff live in Dhaka with their families, however the need to allow children in the workspace had been recognised in this environment also. Staff are allowed to bring children to work, usually with the carer who looks after the child, and a cot or space is provided in the office area.

Babies in the office

When her baby was only a few weeks old one central office staff member left her husband. NK supported her psychologically, in a legal case against her husband, found space for her to live in NK guesthouse, and allowed her to bring her child and a carer to work. NK found that the baby's presence did not distract from work, but rather improved the atmosphere and made a good thing to do in work breaks – go play with the baby. Bringing children to work became an established practice. Two other women brought their daughters, and they grew up together in the NK office, stopping by after school for a few hours daily once they started school (from interview with Mina).

4.3 Democracy

In my family I was not allowed to take part in any decision, but here I have an opportunity to participate. - Fatima

Participatory democracy is a core value of the organisation, and is believed to be necessary to motivate staff and for work for this kind of social change to be effective. How can staff ask landless people to organise into a democratic structure if they don't do the same themselves?

Thus staff elect their own management and leadership. Subcentre heads (called representatives) are chosen by staff in each subcentre. Division and Aanchal Presidents, organisers and trainers and central office team members are elected. The coordinator is appointed by the Board which is elected by the total of the staff.

Work practice includes extensive discussion to reach consensus. Staff are accountable to each other. In meetings staff report on their work, and are grilled by colleagues on divergences from the workplan. Staff receive an incremental wage increase each year, the level of which depends on their performance as evaluated by those they have elected in central office and the subcentre president they have chosen.

At some levels fewer women are represented than men.

Women and men staff at different levels

Position	Coordinator	Central office team	Divisional president	Aanchal president	Subcentre representative	Central Office staff
Women	1	3	0	1	7	15
Men	0	3	4	16	43 (23 subcentres are men)	13

					only)	
Total	1	6	4	17	50	28

At central level, there are equal numbers of women and men staff. However, at the lower levels of Divisional and Aanchal president, this parity has not been reached. These posts require constant travel and this has deterred many women from standing. Some senior women who might have been elected to these posts have also left for the sake of their children's education. To counter these effects, NK has reserved seats for women and since 2002 runs an annual 7 day workshop on women's leadership for women staff.

5. REFLECTIONS

NK philosophy is that poor women and men share common interests and common exploitation. This analysis provides the basis for NK approach to gender. Women and men group members and staff learn about and discuss this framework in training and meetings. It provides the basis for mobilisation of both women's and men's groups against unequal pay, dowry, domestic violence, restrictions on mobility and other violations of women's rights. Consistent with this analysis, gender is mainstreamed throughout the organisation's procedures and processes. In contrast to the sex segregation prevalent in much of society, NK promotes women and men working together, both with the collective living arrangements for staff and with mixed sex committees for landless group members at different levels.

At the same time, the need for separate spaces for women is recognised as an absolute necessity. The core of the organisation: landless groups, are single sex. Training at basic level is also single sex, and becomes alternately mixed and single sex at higher levels. While most staff activities include both women and men, after much discussion the need has been recognised for an annual week long training for women on leadership.

In mobilising against women's and other exploitation, NK faces serious opposition. Local elites and other vested interests have threatened staff and group members, and sometimes carried out these threats, including filing false cases, mobilising Muslim fundamentalist opposition, physical attacks, rape, burning houses, plundering, sending dacoits, poisoning land and stealing livestock. Group members and staff have also met with ostracism both from local leaders and from within the communities they are trying to mobilise. Despite such risks, NK groups continue to gain ground through collective organising, claiming rights and pooling resources.

To a lesser degree, internal factors also provide obstacles to gender equality. Collective living and democratic structures provide both challenges and potential for gender change. In terms of attitude change, the philosophy and sharing of practical experiences within the organisation have had an impact. Every group and staff member I spoke to expressed total willingness to

recognise and combat discrimination against women. This does not mean there is no resistance, for example NK has noted that men's groups are less active on women's rights issues than are women's groups, and fewer women are elected to group committees, and to middle level management in the staff structure. However within the NK environment a new norm has been created that it is not acceptable to voice support for exploitation of women. Furthermore, records of successful mobilising around women's interests, and concrete examples of more egalitarian gender relations in the lives and families of staff and group member suggests that real change is happening.

The strength and effectiveness of the organisation seems to lie in their framework of analysis which enables landless peasants to gain conviction that they too deserve human rights, and which inspires staff to make a huge commitment to their work. The consistency of values in programme activities and staff practices is essential to this process.

While most Christian Aid and partner staff won't wish to move in with each other and emulate collective living arrangements, there are important lessons to learn from NK. Mainstreaming of gender, and separate spaces for women are both needed. Cultures must be changed, and decades of time invested. Values of human rights and equality, and a clear analysis of what these mean, need to be applied consistently throughout both programme and internal practices. Connections must be made between exploitation at local, national, and global levels, including the exploitation staff suffer from and perpetuate in their own lives and working arrangements, and those faced by the people they are trying to help. Even then, some challenges and inequalities will remain. At the same time, these strategies will open possibilities for amazing and tangible progress towards equality.

Annex: Methodology and schedule

Date	Location	Activities
26 th April	Dhaka	Meet with NK head office staff
27 th	Shaghata village, NK subcentre,	Travel to Shaghata, discussion with subcentre POs, attend men's group meeting
28 th	Gaibandha district	Attend two women's group meetings, visit village, attend men's group meeting
29 th		Attend Thana committee meeting, interview group members: cultural team leader (man), women Thana committee members (women)
30 th		Interview Thana committee president (man), interview his wife Union Parishad member and women's group president, attend staff meeting, interview PO (woman)
1 st May		Participate in May day demonstration, watch May day drama, visit Kachmoti's village and grave, meet with combined men and women's group members, interview male PO, discussion with subcentre POs
2 nd	Palashbari, and Bogra	Return Dhaka, on the way interview head of NK subcenter in Palashbari, group discussion with women who had fought campaign for higher wages for domestic workers in Palashbari, visit NK training centre in Bogra, interview male trainer/PO
3 rd - 7 th	Dhaka	Dhaka, write up and final consultations with NK head office, Christian Aid Bangladesh, and DFID Bangladesh
8 th -21 th		Revision of draft after feedback from NK, and subsequent revision after feedback from Christian Aid.

Meetings

Central office staff

Coordinator, Khushi Kabir (F)

Tanja Haque, Christian Aid, Dhaka (F)

Semi- structured interviews

With group members

in Shaghata:

Group members from two women's and two men's groups

Group leader and UP member, Achhiron Begum, (F)

Thana committee member elected, Nanda Rani, (F)

Thana committee member selected, Rahima (F)

Thana committee president, Jasim (M)

Thana committee member and cultural team leader, Naiser Ali (M)

With Women's Group members in Pashburi

With NK staff:

Shaghata PO, Nurjahan (F)

Shaghata PO, Riton Chandra Dey (M)

Palashbari Subcentre representative, Fatima Begum (F)

Bogra training centre trainer (M)

Participation and observation

Living with and casual discussion with POs, Anchal president Mamonur Rashid (M) and Mina Sarkar, Assistant central organiser and interpreter for 5 days

Taking part in May day demonstration and watching drama

Visiting Kachmoti's village, grave, and hearing story from combined women and men group members