

Mobilization for social change through empowerment

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Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971, after a war that resulted in close to 3 million dead and badly destabilized country. Since then, Bangladesh has become a parliamentary democracy, but with weak institutions, endemic corruption, and undemocratic processes. Bangladesh also faces major inequalities, which particularly affect women, landless workers and indigenous communities. Indeed, women are poorly represented in the higher political bodies and lack decision-making power and leadership. Corruption and a patriarchal system maintain the position of the ruling elite. Nijera Kori has been working for 40 years to empower women and landless workers through bottom-up, grassroots strategies. By promoting autonomous social mobilization and political participation at a local level, the Nijera Kori increases the emancipation of landless people and allows them to claim their rights.

They work as facilitator and organizer to enhance the capacity of landless people to act with their own resources to fight discrimination and oppression. In the Rampur Upazilla, a region previously characterized by its strong Muslim fundamentalism, the Bahadurpur women's landless group was created 30 years ago with the help of Nijera Kori and is a successful example of this empowerment process. Today, this women's landless group is influential in the region and one of its members, Mariam Begum, has become an important figure in the local governance. Mariam Begum and her group fight for various issues concerning gender, health, political representation and the marginalization of landless people. What it has achieved through its actions epitomizes what the Bangla words Nijera Kori stand for: We do it ourselves.

Born in 1959 in the Rampur district, Mariam was married at the age of 12. She grew up and began her life as a wife and mother in a difficult context characterized by political tension in the time where Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan. By that time a strong Muslim fundamentalism was in place and had highly restrictive social norms against women. Until the Liberation War in 1971, Mariam was forbidden to leave home and devoted herself to her children and the housework. Everything

"Before Nijera Kori, nobody knew anything about the discriminations bound in gender issues, in the violence against women...etc. We just couldn't go out! Now we made elected one of ours, and our opinion is taken into account in the decision-making process"

changed when the independence war started and she witnessed the reality of systematic violence and abuse against women during this time. She quickly became aware of the unfair and deprived status of women and how they were trivialized in her own society. Soon afterwards, Mariam Begum met the local Nijera Kori landless group and began to take an active role in their activities. Her involvement with Nijera Kori reinforced her convictions and built her knowledge of many issues. It also gave her the strength to fight on gender issues and to create the first women's group in the area: Bahadurpur women's landless group.

The Bahadurpur women's group addresses issues connected to gender, education, health, and helping landless people gain access to vital resources and services. Each group member spends time to learn about their rights and the laws and the ways to take action. Through Nijera Kori trainings and numerous internal discussions the group has learned about their rights. They also learn and strategize about how to raise awareness about different national issues including discrimination towards women.

Nijera Kori helped to strengthen the group's independence and organization through education and accompaniment by staff permitting the group to enhance its own structures and capabilities. By promoting self-confidence, individual affirmation and independence towards other organizations (social, political or economic), the women's landless group was soon able to claim their rights through their own activities and fights. Mariam Begum and her group became increasingly active in the region, helping to combat various social injustices.



Through her role in resolving social conflicts and a series of political actions, Mariam Begum gained influence and became well respected in her district. Indeed, she became progressively so famous that large numbers of distressed people came to her asking for help. In spite of successful actions at a local level, change was still limited and the voice of their landless group was still largely unheard and marginalized in local government. With time the ambition of the group grew, as they wanted to act on deeper structures of constraint in the local administration. In 1997, to fight the lack of representation of women and landless interests, the group took advantage of a government initiative to reserve seats for women in the various administrative and political levels in order to promote diversity. Due to her experience and her reputation for solving problems it was natural that Mariam, was chosen by her group to run in the local election.

To assume this role, she was able to count on Nijera Kori's support, which gave her the encouragement and the necessary knowledge to run for these elections. She won her first election in 1997, obtaining a seat for 5 years on the local council (Union Parishad), and then again in 2002. In this capacity Mariam could begin to act on important issues like the struggle for equality between men and women.

During her mandates, Mariam contributed to the reduction of corruption, which is endemic in the administration, as well as the proper distribution of the government allowances for the disabled, elders and pregnant women. She also worked for wage equality between men and women, successfully raising women's salaries to 150 Taka/day from only 30, compared to 250 Taka/day for men.

Furthermore, Mariam is present in most Shalish meetings called to resolve local conflicts through discussion in the community and only referring them to the legal system when a solution cannot be reached. Throughout her time she worked to empower women. These actions allowed women to become more involved in the decision making process in the region.



In 2016, after a period of instability and an unsuccessful election attempt in 2011, she decided with her group to run for the local council again, this time for the post of vice-chair.

Straight away the group faced numerous obstacles but thanks to their strong organization, knowledge and the advice of Nijera Kori, Mariam Begum and her group were ready for the challenge. The group first had to find the necessary funds for the campaign as well as the 2,000 Taka fee to run as a candidate in the elections. Nijera Kori has always encouraged landless groups to maintain savings where all group members deposit every week a small amount (between 5 to 10 Taka).

So Mariam's group was able to use a part of this money to pay the candidate fee.

The Bahadurpur women landless group members took on the task of organizing her campaign. Women offered some tea or pan- to people before engaging them in discussing the issues and urging support for Mariam. Other landless groups contributed in their own way to the campaign, in cash or in actions (ex: printing of campaign posters). Nijera Kori was also present in Mariam's campaign, supplying moral support to the groups, helping to organize gatherings, and interacting directly with the voters.

The day of an election is decisive in the electoral process in Bangladesh. The groups mobilized all of their resources to win the election: "We had to elect our Mariam", repeated group members. She represented the hope of political representation for the community:

"Mariam Apa is devoted to her people, she never refuses to bring her help. She is the ideal candidate thanks to her speaker's qualities, her availability, her integrity, her patience and her closeness".

The morning of Election Day, tragedy struck. Mariam's beloved husband and the father of her child died after a long fight against cancer. Nevertheless, the efforts of the women's group allowed Mariam to stay at home and mourn, while they assured that the elections ran properly. Nijera Kori and the group worked until the

last minute, encouraging people to vote and preventing the attempts by their opponents to influence the vote (it's easy to slide some money in a leaf of pan, which Bengali people love).

The evening of Thursday, April 21st, 2016, thanks to the mobilization and the determination of the groups and Nijera Kori, Mariam Begum was elected as vice-chair, with 3,500 votes out of 5,118 that were cast. She promised in spite of her pain, to meet her commitments and pursue the fight for the rights of women and the landless.

Mariam Begum and the women's group she belongs to are a perfect example of what poor people can achieve when they organize, learn and act to demand their rights as part of the struggle to create a more equal and just country.

The success of Bahadurpur women group in the resolution of social conflicts



For a long time Muni was beaten by husband. She was finally dismissed from her home without any financial means. Islamic law says that the husband has to give to his wife a certain amount of money in case of divorce; but in practice, that practically never happens. Facing insecurity after being dismissed, Muni's family came to see Mariam's landless group for help. After numerous protests, they finally obtained justice for Muni who has begun a new life.

A situation of Talaqⁱ and Hilaⁱⁱ was denounced in the area. The couple wanted to come back together but were obligated to respect Hila social practice. Thus, the family of the woman visited Mariam's group who contacted a local journalist. He covered the event at her request, to denounce this case. Finally, the local authorities intervened to solve the problem, and this kind of situation never happened again in the area.

ⁱ Talaq is a practice stemming from the Sharia. If a man wants to divorce his wife, he has to pronounce three times "Talaq" and the divorce is pronounced.

ⁱⁱ Hila consists of the fact that if a man rejected his wife by Talaq wishes to get back her back, she has to get married to another man and after 3 days divorce of him to be able to remarry her last husband. This practice is illegal.