

Violence against women and strategies of women

Raising awareness about women's rights in rural Bangladesh

By Inès Sanchez and Abel Cazenave

Since gaining its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has seen significant improvements regarding women's rights. Women's rights are protected by the law; they have better access to education, employment and health care. The Prime Minister and leader of the main opposition party are both women and women occupy more high government and bureaucratic positions than at the time of independence. Nevertheless, it is necessary to make a distinction between rural and urban areas when it comes to gender issues. In poor rural areas women suffer more violence and discrimination, where traditional religious behaviour determines so much of how society is organized, especially the gender roles.

Women during Independence war of Bangladesh



Bengali women have endured many ordeals through the last century, in particular during the Liberation war in 1971. The mass murders and numerous atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistani army and associated militias from the Islamist party Jamaat e Islami profoundly marked the collective consciousness of Bangladeshis, especially of women, who were targeted during this war. Pakistani authorities as well as Muslim religious leaders openly invited men to rape Bangladeshi

women. Rape was considered weapon of war and it had terrible consequences on women and those memories are still painfully vivid for Bangladeshis even today. Feminism in Bangladesh had made a long way since this period characterized by a very strong Muslim fundamentalism.

The horrific sexual violence against women during the war helped to open the eyes of some people to the unjust situation of all women. Very soon after the war, NGO's and activists began to fight for

women's rights. It has been a long process but the situation for women has improved considerably in the last decades. But there is a long way to go and gender issues are still very important in Bangladesh. Women are still not safe from violence whether it is inside or outside the home. Women still face discrimination, and many suffer physical and psychological abuse every day from husbands, family and the community. Girls are still less likely to be educated than boys and the idea that women should stay at home is remains widely accepted.

Nijera Kori training

Nijera Kori has developed multiple strategies to raise awareness about the unfair status of women. Gender equity is one of the elements of its overarching goal: «NK recognizes that patriarchy perpetuates the disadvantages of inequality, injustice and exclusion, which are intensified in relation to women and girls.» The staff of Nijera Kori makes use of different strategies for the empowerment of women through the organization of landless women's groups. Discussions and debates within the landless groups are complemented by training sessions.

Nijera Kori has four training centers in Bangladesh, and trainings are organized to bring information and knowledge about issues such as gender. Nijera Kori's action in poor rural areas has helped to bring significant changes for women, including a reduction in domestic violence.

To better understand the impact of their actions, we had the chance to attend a training on family law. The training brought together twenty women and men of different ages, all coming from different villages as representatives of their landless group

The offices of Nijera Kori in rural areas are where the staff live and work when not on their time off. In order to prevent different risk of favouritism, a policy requires that staff work in another area of Bangladesh from where they live. This policy permits the team invest their full time in the village they are assigned to and motivates them to attend events of the villagers and develop new relationships. The teams integrate into the social life of the villages and the landless groups and members dedicate their time to raising awareness and helping the rural poor in their daily lives.

Story of Maloti, Nijera Kori trainer in Bogra training center

While she was a young woman in rural Bangladesh, Maloti noticed the presence of Nijera Kori because of the growing influence of the landless groups. As a young woman without education and facing poverty and religious restrictions, she was attracted by their progressive ideas and their different view on gender roles. « Before my encounter with Nijera Kori, I had no education, I couldn't go out, I had to cover myself... I was not even aware that child marriage was forbidden in Bangladesh. When I became aware of this law I tried my best to spread this information in my area.»



In rural Bangladesh, there is a huge lack of information and basic rights are mostly unknown by the poor. Most of the time, people apply Muslim teachings, or follow traditional accepted behaviours. But even Muslim law is often poorly known and badly interpreted. The majority of rural workers don't know how to read, and even if they do the Koran is not translated into Bengali. As Maloti questioned her culture and traditions she developed her knowledge and capacity. She felt responsible to raise awareness in her own community of gender issues and began with her landless group to fight against violence and sexual harassment in her community. This was a challenge for Maloti and her group. In rural Bangladesh it is still complicated to obtain justice from the court for cases of violence or rape.

« In my village, a girl was raped by her stepfather. Nobody wanted to act on it because it is a taboo subject and somehow an accepted practice. After a strong protest by my group, the man was finally judged and sentenced to 12 years in jail.» For Maloti, this victory was the beginning of her life as an activist. Inspired by

the experience of mobilizing people for social justice, she began to work with Nijera Kori to give people the same opportunity that she had.

«Nijera Kori permitted me to value myself as a woman and develop my capacity. I don't live with my family but I never feel alone and I am really proud of my accomplishments here. Being a trainer brings me a lot of satisfaction. I can bring my own vision, share it with others and see how people are positively evolving. I will certainly never quit Nijera Kori. Knowing that I am contributing to change people's way of thinking makes me really satisfied as a human being. It even doesn't feel like a work, it's my greatest pleasure.»

Maloti is a great example of the activists who dedicate their lives to making their country a better place. By raising awareness everyday on gender issues, Maloti is contributing to reduce the violence against women in rural areas.

Babon Mula story

Babon Mula, a 30 years old landless worker met us at the end of the session to discuss his own experience, here is a part of his part of his testimony:

«Before my involvement with Nijera Kori, I never respected women. I proscribed my wife at home, I always ate before her during meals and I was even beating her. When I was younger, nobody ever taught me another way to act with women. In my village, women were considerate as

propriety of men that shall be control by violence. In most rural areas, those practices are rarely questioned because we don't have access to education and we don't beneficiate from exterior points of views. When I met Nijera Kori, I discovered a new vision on gender roles and equality, which was never happen to me before. It opened my eyes and me realize that the practice I was reproducing were actually not normal. After spending a lot of time in Nijera Kori, I realized the unfair status of women in our culture and the negative impact that this division had on our lives.

My life really changed in a positive way after this. I began to help my wife with the domestic tasks as cooking or taking care of our children. I really learned to respect my wife and the amazing job she was doing at home and I don't feel superior to her anymore. My involvement in the housework had a lot of positive repercussions in our life. For example, sharing my meal with my wife and my children has really brought us together. We communicate a lot more with my wife and we take all decisions together. Today I feel so much happier in my life. We are a united family, we love each other and we take care of each other. I am really proud of that.»



Noyon's changed way of life



Noyon Mia, lives in Nurpur of Chandina Upazila in Comilla district. When he was growing up poverty was a constant reality for his family and so despite his wishes he had to join his father to provide for the family. His father was a rickshaw puller and he had only studied till grade 5.

Noyon married Rehana from the adjacent village when he was 18 years old and Rehana only 14. Living in an environment clouded by religious and social superstitions, Noyon used to physically abuse his wife. Not only did Noyon Mia practice religion in his personal life — he also regularly participated in Waaz Mahfils (public religious discussions).

As a result, his views on women were very conservative and he was averse to anything progressive. To him, abusing his wife was completely normal and even a duty. If Rehana was late for serving the dinner, if she ever questioned him, she would be physically abused. Rehana could not even protest. "I was born a woman, what else is there in life other than doing housework, bearing children and getting beaten by the husband," Rehana used to say. Rehana was constantly subjected to physical torture and at one point; she shared this with her neighbors.



One day, when Rehana raised questions about some domestic matters, Noyon started beating her. Rehana, was severely injured, so her neighbour Monowara Begum took her to the hospital. Even though Noyon was glad of Monowara's behaviour, he could not accept the idea of a woman going to the hospital and leaving her home. "Monowara apa is a good woman, she has cared for my wife when she was sick, took her to the hospital.

But she should still remember that she is a woman. A woman going out, going to the hospital — is that right?" said Noyon at the time.

Monowara, who is a member of Nijera Kori, took the initiative to create a women's landless group in Nurpur. She invited Rehana to become a member of the group, and, as Noyon was reluctant to permit Rehana to join the landless group, Monowara convinced him to come to one meeting. Noyon recounted how "the first day I went to the meeting, I saw that men and women were seating together. The dynamics of their relationship were completely different. Everyone called each other brothers or sisters and sang together. The songs, too, were different. I started liking these."

For almost a year Monowara Begum took Noyon along to the team meetings. "I kept learning new things in those meeting. The conversation was very interesting and I progressively started

becoming interested in the landless group,” says Noyon. One year later in Nurpur, Monowara Begum decided to start a men’s landless group in Nurpur and proposed to Noyon that he join it.

In the landless group meeting, discussion used to be oriented toward women’s rights: the barriers faced by women as human beings, the reasons for discrimination, and the analysis of religious dogma and social values.. At one point, Noyon started playing an active role in encouraging others to participate in the activities of the landless group. Noyon began to understand that his way of acting was the result of what he had learned from his community, religion and traditions. “Truth be told, until now I just reproduced what others did in the society. Now I am learning through my life experiences and I am starting to think that the way of thinking that is prevalent in our society is maybe not right,” Noyon said after the meeting.