

**Nijeder Janyia Nijera**  
(We for Ourselves)

**STRATEGIC IMPACT INQUIRY: CARE  
BANGLADESH**



Women wage laborers working in rice fields in Mankira

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

BACE	Bangladesh Association for Community Education
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CLTS	Community Led Total Sanitation
DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focus group Discussion
FT	Field Trainers
IGA	Income generating activity
IMLT	Impact Measurement and Learning Team (CARE)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
Nijera	Nijeder Janyia Nijera
NL	Natural Leader
NW	North west
PAUP	Polly Artha Samajik Unnayan Parisad (NGO)
PHL-SII	Partnership for a Healthy Life – Strategic Impact Inquiry
RLP	Rural Livelihoods Program
RMP	Rural Maintenance Program
SDU	Social Development Unit
SII	Strategic Impact Inquiry
TNO	Thana Nirbahi Officer (sub-district coordination officer)
UP	Union Parishad
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAW-PHL	Violence Against Women - Partnership for a Healthy Life
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development fund
VGF	Vulnerable Group Feeding

## Local terms

Dadon	Tied loan
Gusti	Lineage-based kin group
Kantha	Quilting (traditional)
Khas	government land or water bodies (for distribution to the poor)
Para	Neighborhood (hamlet)
Salish	'Traditional' arbitration mechanism for dispute settlement, usually convened by local male elites
Salishkar	Arbitrator
Samaj	Society
Union Parishad	Governing body at union level (lowest administrative unit of government)
Thana/Upazilla	Sub-district

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry - globally and in Bangladesh

The aim of CARE's *Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII)* is to better understand CARE International's contribution to women's empowerment and gender equity.<sup>1</sup> The global research protocol uses a framework based on three interrelated dimensions or faces of empowerment: agency, structure and social relations. THE SII thus wishes to explore how CARE's programs

- 1) contribute to women's agency, that is, the expansion of women's capabilities to identify, pursue and achieve their basic needs and rights;
- 2) facilitate a process through which women engage in social relations with other actors to fulfill their needs and rights; and finally
- 3) contribute to an enabling environment for women's empowerment i.e. the transformation of social structures (e.g. cultural constructs, local level institutions, legal and policy frameworks) that institutionalize women's marginalization.

Within this broad analytical framework, each participating country office has designed its own *Strategic Impact Inquiry* taking into account the ways in which gender relations are shaped by local and national contexts. Original field research is being conducted in four countries: Bangladesh, Ecuador, India and Yemen and the overall purpose of the SII is to improve accountability and impact as well as to improve learning on impact assessment methodologies.

In Bangladesh, the SII was initiated with a study that looked at the notion of women's empowerment from the perspective of individuals and groups within local society<sup>2</sup>. The study has been used to inform the SIIs carried out so far, particularly in the area of methods. The SII is focusing on four projects – The Violence Against Women (VAW) initiative - Partnership for a Healthy Life, Rural Maintenance Program (RMP), Nijeder Janyia Nijera, and Women's Access to Markets. This is the report of the third SII carried out in Bangladesh; the SIIs of the Violence against Women initiative<sup>3</sup> and Rural Maintenance Program<sup>4</sup> have been completed and the Women's Access to Markets project will be carried out in October 2006.

The exploratory research on women's empowerment served to analyze gender and power dynamics in one setting in NW Bangladesh and to test methods which were appropriate in the Bangladesh context and which allowed women to express themselves in relation to sensitive and personal issues. It also explored women's aspirations around empowerment, how they differed in relation to class and generation, and the way in which they might differ from some of the globally used dimensions, as well as those discussed in feminist literature (bearing in mind there are different strands of feminism). For example, earning income was valued by women across class, and it is clear that a lack of material assets and dependence on others for all survival needs is disempowering. On the other hand, in a context in which family honor and social standing is tied up with women's *purdah* (although things are changing) and where women may face harassment in public space, both women and men's views about women's mobility are much

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<sup>1</sup> see Martinez, E. 2005. "Proposed Global Research Protocol for CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment". Atlanta: CARE USA.

<sup>2</sup> Kanji, N. with B.Bode and A.Haq "Women's empowerment: perceptions, boundaries and strategies in Jalagari Village, NW Bangladesh", August 2005, Care Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Kanji, N., B.Bode and A.Haq "Partnership for healthy life: violence against women initiative", SII, Care Bangladesh, March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, V.C. "Rural maintenance programme", SSI Care Bangladesh, draft, August 2006.

more mixed and complex. While control over decisions or autonomous decision-making is often given importance (in at least some dominant strands of feminist literature), voice, respect for their views and joint decision making was emphasized by women across generation and class. Another aspiration that emerged from a discussion of women's role models is the ability or power to give: not only in material goods but also in terms of advice and support. Women have referred clearly to these aspects of empowerment in this SII.

Most dimensions of empowerment apply to both women and men and represent universal human rights and needs, but the factors, structures and institutions which impede empowerment are different for women, since they include subordination based on gender. Gender-based violence is a clear example and one which negatively affects the everyday life of too many women in Bangladesh.

The research on empowerment suggested that the key dimensions that the SII should examine in Bangladesh include:

- Women's access to and control over income and material assets
- Decision-making processes
- Mobility and women's participation in the public sphere, including access to services and markets
- Marriage and dowry
- Gender-based violence
- Women's access to justice
- Women's political participation

The three SIIs carried out to date have raised all these issues, and examined them to varying extents, since each project has related directly to particular dimensions. The VAW project, in particular, was focused on changing this disempowering practice, but the SII showed how a range of other dimensions, including women's income, group participation and ongoing support are needed to affect gender-based violence. However, even when programs have not chosen to raise or address gender-based violence, the issue has been raised by both women and men involved in project activities.

The framework used in the SII has been very useful and appropriate to analyze the effects of CARE programs on women's empowerment. It is useful to ask separate questions about dimensions of empowerment which relate to agency, relations and structure. However, as the report on RMP points out, these constructs are interrelated in complex ways: for example, agency is important in how we construct and change relations, and social relations have a huge influence on how we see and define ourselves. Societal structures, at different levels, channel and restrict or expand agency and influence relations. The SIIs show how difficult it is to transform structures, and although all three constructs inter-relate, we found it easier and more useful to keep 'structure' analytically distinct in both the VAW-PHL and the Nijera SIIs, whereas changes in agency and relations are more closely intertwined. This is partly a question of the different scale of change we are inquiring into - it tends to be collective action (or the collective exercise of agency) at scale, which may bring enough pressure to bear to change structures which are oppressive to disadvantaged groups of people in a sustained or profound way. On the other hand, agency, relationships and structure are all in constant processes of interaction and change due to wider factors such as global integration, national political dynamics and new technologies.

## 1.2 Nijeder Janyia Nijera(We for Ourselves)

### Project history and approach<sup>5</sup>

Nijeder Janyia Nijera, (henceforth Nijera) works through a community led approach “to promote the self-realization of poor rural women and men, to help them articulate their own vision of development, and to strengthen their capacity to act in pursuit of their self-defined goals”. It was launched in October 2004, under the Rural Livelihoods Program (RLP), which is currently drawing to an end although Nijera will continue through a range of modalities which are currently being worked out.

RLP was funded by DFID and originates in earlier projects where Farmer Field Schools employed experiential learning techniques to promote women’s homestead vegetable production and rice fish cultivation. Shortly before the projects merged, CARE as a whole had embarked upon its new Rights Based Approach to development, and field staff has been given wide latitude to explore new ideas which they felt had the potential to advance the interests of poor men and women in the communities where they were working. Experiences from this period of experimentation helped to shape the Nijera approach.

In a parallel development, starting in 2002, the Social Development Unit (SDU) was established within RLP, to conduct and commission studies which would provide a better understanding of context and feed the Rights Based Approach(ibid). This substantial body of work produced a range of analytical methods and participatory field tools which have been a second important influence on Nijera.<sup>6</sup> For example, a three category typology of *para* (neighborhoods or hamlets) was developed, based on a distinction between elites who might, at least under some circumstances, be prepared to support the development of the poor (“good kings”) and those who operated in a more purely exploitative zero sum fashion (“bad kings”). This helped to select and locate activities in a way that made them less likely to fall foul of negative elite influence. Work was focused on those in the “tertiary” group with a high proportion of poor people, an absence of powerful figures dominating the local political landscape, and a low level of patron-client relations, where a greater amount of space existed for poorer people in general and women in particular to interact and provide mutual support.

SDU (four men and one woman) took the lead on Nijera, working alongside a group of 20 RLP Field Trainers (FT), selected from previous projects. The FTs who had all originally been recruited to work in the Rural Livelihood Program (on either the Shabge or Go-Interfish project), were selected from the various districts where the program had been operating – Dinajpur, Gaibanda,

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<sup>5</sup> This sub-section is based on Mick Howes process reconstruction of Nijera (2005) and Brigitta Bode’s TORs for the Nijera SII.

<sup>6</sup> A range of methods were developed, used and re-used across this body of work. Cards were prepared to summarise elite characteristics and relationships from the perspective of different actors and to produce “power maps”. Maps helped to locate key resources and power centres, especially at Union level. Critical incident analysis made it possible to illustrate specific instances of power at work. Extended well-being ranking cards, in combination with genealogies, helped to create “bubble charts” illustrating the distribution of resources and access to external resources within individual communities. Time matrices were used to explore the unfolding of individual livelihood strategies. Process re-construction, including production flow charts, showed how development activities unfolded, who was involved at each juncture, how much different actors contributed, the problems arising at different stages and how these could be addressed.

Rangpur, Kurigram, Joypurhat, Panchagarh and Thakurgaon in the Northwest, and Chittagong and Cox's Bazar in the Southeast.

In August 2004, SDU led by Brigitta Bode and two consultants (Mick Howes and Kamal Kar) organized a three-week orientation and planning workshop, with staff. This capacity building workshop set out Nijera's objectives, approach and methods (CARE, 2004). Mick Howes had been involved in many SDU studies and Kamal Kar brought with him long experience of Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS). The CLTS was shared with workshop participants and provided a vehicle for them to acquire more facilitation skills and practice a number of specific PRA techniques. Kamal Kar has continued to provide intensive support to Nijera through frequent capacity building workshops with staff, Natural Leaders, and elected representatives and has given programming input, taking the project beyond CLTS.

The initial workshop produced a clear mission statement, which demonstrates the process orientation of the project:

**Nijera Mission Statement:**

1. To work with poor rural women and men, and the communities in which they live, encouraging them to articulate their own experiences of poverty, disempowerment and social exclusion
2. To help them to build their own analysis of the power structures and practices through which their present situation is reproduced
3. To enable them to identify their own agendas for action
4. To build internal capacity for these agendas to be pursued and for progress to be monitored, providing limited direct and material support where necessary
5. In particular, to help to identify ways in which poor people and their allies can negotiate effectively with more powerful local actors in pursuit of their aims
6. To assist in the establishment of linkages to external bodies, agencies and service providers whose co-operation is required for the fulfillment of identified goals
7. To establish collaborative arrangements with other parts of CARE Bangladesh and with other like-minded development agencies to build capacity in areas we cannot deal with by ourselves.
8. To encourage woman to woman and poor to poor learning as the primary mechanism by which successful initiatives are more broadly disseminated.
9. To disseminate promising initiatives arising from Nijera sites for further testing under other parts of the Rural Livelihood Program
10. To carefully document lessons learned and disseminate these within CARE, to other parties and agencies in Bangladesh, and to the wider international development community.

The way in which Nijera was anticipated to evolve is illustrated in Annex 1.

The initial locations selected were Mostapur (Rangpur), Jalagari (Gaibanda), Mankira (Dinajpur), Adhikari (Dinajpur) and Rudra (Chittagong). Since Nijera works through an iterative and process oriented approach, the various activities that individuals and groups are engaged in at each project site are somewhat distinct from each other. This trend reflects the differences in terms of agro-ecology, historical developments (including land tenure systems and subsequent power dynamics) and distance to markets.

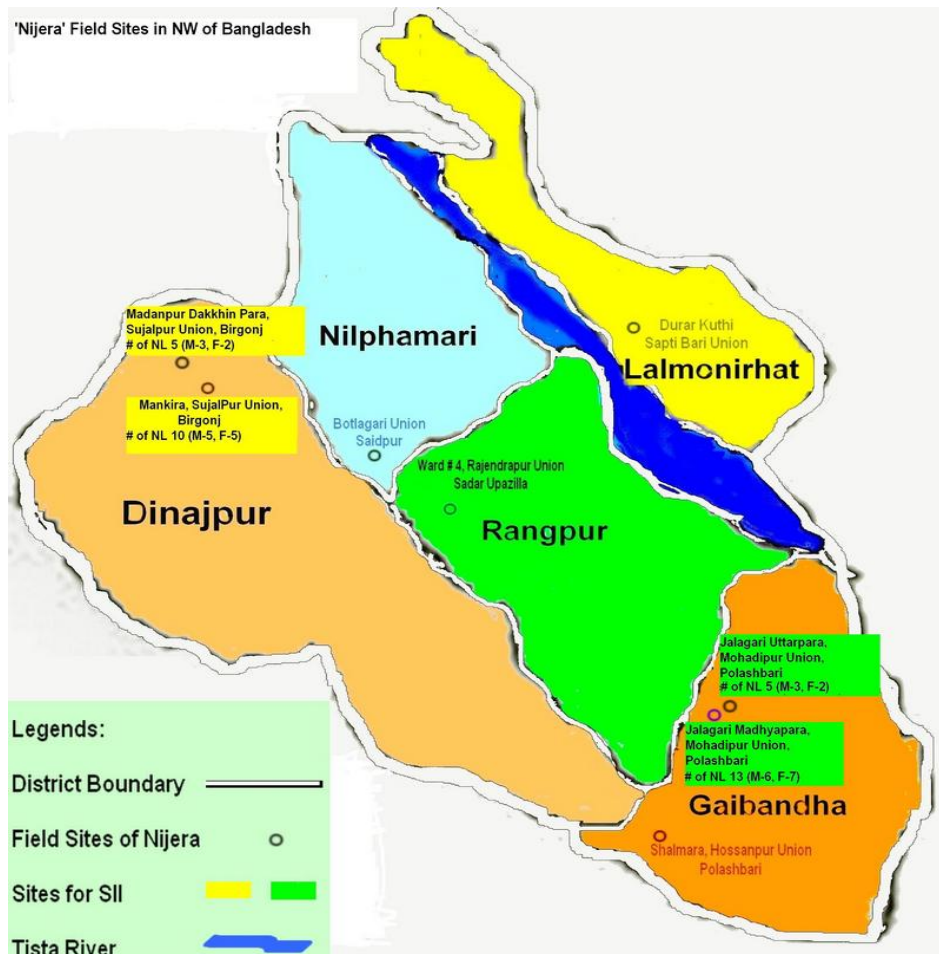
In each of its locations, Nijera initially begins its work in one single *para*, which then becomes the center of initiatives which fan out into nearby communities. Community led total sanitation (CLTS) is generally the entry point in the initial as well as the neighboring communities. Once CLTS is under way, the facilitators work with men and women to analyze key aspects of their lives and prioritize key initiatives that would improve the social and economic conditions of the poorest households; these include income generating activities, individual and collective cultivation of unused spaces, savings groups, roadside plantations and more. Two site specific monographs have been produced which detail the process in Adhikari (SDU, Jan 2006) and Mankira (SDU, Oct 2005)

As CLTS and other initiatives unfold, key individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds emerge as "Natural Leaders" and drive the various initiatives forward. Thus, although Nijera emphasizes its work with the poorest households, it engages a diverse range of actors, including local elites and elected representatives. Over the past 22 months, the project has worked with the natural leaders in both workshop and field settings to build their capacity in analysis, facilitation and mobilization and to negotiate with elected representatives and service providers. During the past 9 months, the project has worked with elected leaders in workshops and field settings to engage them in processes of self-reflection regarding attitudes and behavior towards their constituents and the distribution of state funded entitlements, particularly in terms of the poorest groups.

In October 2005, *Nijera* expanded its activities to three additional locations in the districts of Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, and Gaibanda and recruited an additional 8 community facilitators. Selection of the Lalmonirhat and Gaibanda fields was based on consultations at the *upazilla* level (Nirbahi officers and key GoB officials) whereby the unions in more remote areas and with the largest number of poor households were identified. The short-listed unions were then visited and final selections were based on discussions with chairmen, members, local NGOs and civil society members. The map on the next page shows the Nijera field sites and the sites selected for the SII.

The project aims to enable economically and socially marginalized men and women to build their own agendas for action and pursue these (agency) and to engage with a variety of actors (relations) - peers, informal elites, elected leaders, service providers- to fulfill the identified goals. At the same time, the project has begun to work with locally elected bodies (political structures) to increase their responsiveness to the needs of the poorest constituents and to serve as a space in which poor men and women can seek support and contribute to decisions around key issues.





## 2. Methodology for the Nijera SII

### 2.1 Approach

This project is implemented by CARE's Social Development Unit (SDU). Particular care was therefore taken to minimize bias. The methodology was discussed between the consultant and SDU immediately prior to a preparatory two-day workshop. The criteria were set out for site selection and sampling and a range of methods discussed. These were then developed and modified in the workshop. SDU staff tended to be the note-takers in the field, while other CARE staff led the interviews or exercises. The field facilitators working in both the sites were responsible for logistics and were not involved in interviewing. Finally, we took even more care than usual to make sure findings were triangulated.

Two clusters were selected for the SII: Jalagari (where the initial research on women's empowerment had taken place) and Mankira. In the VAW SII, we selected two sites, one according to where project staff perceived the project to be developing well and another where there were many difficulties. SDU felt that it was not possible to distinguish between Nijera sites in this way, because progress is closely monitored in each site and extra help is provided when the process falters. Rather, we selected two sites where there were differences in agro-ecology and land distribution to get a variation in the activities being developed. While Jalagari is flood prone, Mankira is drought prone. Jalagari is poorer but there are less inequalities in land holdings than in Mankira, where there are more day laborers.

While the population of Jalagari is predominantly Muslim, Mankira is predominantly Hindu. In each site, the main *para*, where Nijera activities had begun, was selected as well as one of the extension *paras*. The extension *paras* were selected from the first round of spread from the main *para* (first generation spread). It was important to select an extension *para* because SDU is keen to analyze the spread process, which is key to achieve a greater scale of impacts in Nijera, as well as providing insights for future programs. Since the project has not been going long, it was better to select a first generation *para* to assess impact. Nijera is now active in 14 *paras* in Jalagari and 18 *paras* in Mankira.

Electoral politics interact with local forms of justice, and the distribution of state-funded entitlements. In Mohadpur union, where Jalagari is located, election candidates for chairman and member positions distribute funds to local elites where their constituency is weak. The funds are used to buy votes, and funds are then 'recuperated' through payments for dispute resolution (*salish*) and for state funded entitlements. In the case of Jalagari, which did not vote for the current chairman, this meant that food aid was denied to poor households when they suffered floods which affected their harvests. In Sujalpur union, where Mankira is located, election candidates gain votes through long standing sharecropping and labor contracts. Although a candidate who promised a fairer distribution of development resources (including *khas* ponds) was elected as chairman, he has had difficulty in establishing his authority with powerful elected members and members of the landed elite. More details are given in Annex 3.



A two day workshop with the full team was held to discuss the sites, the project and the objectives of and questions for the SII, as well as to develop the specific methods and tools to be used. The workshop also helped the team to 'gel' and work together well in the field. The total number of researchers involved in this SII was 35 (see Annex 1), although all were not present throughout the research.

Following the workshop, field work was carried out between 24<sup>th</sup> July and 1<sup>st</sup> August. The pattern we followed was to work in the field on one day followed by a day of debriefing and discussion. This worked well to identify any problems and fill gaps/ follow up issues as they arose, as well as to manage the logistics of a large team doing different things in the field. As with the PHL SII, a useful final morning was spent in a synthesis session with the full team to discuss key findings and lessons.

## 2.2 Questions and checklist of issues

The main questions that the SII set out to address are the following:

1. To what extent have poor women gained greater agency to pursue their interests?
2. To what extent has Nijera's work resulted in attitudinal and behavioral changes amongst men, particularly natural leaders, and from different class backgrounds?
3. What kinds of relationships have poorer women formed to pursue their goals and to what extent have women been able to negotiate with key power holders?

4. Have local structures (formal and informal) been changed in any way by the Nijera project and how?

A basic checklist of themes/questions was discussed and refined in the workshop, and then modified to suit the objectives and the group or individual the researchers were going to work with. Researchers worked in groups to develop the questions in Bangla, for different groups and individuals.

1. How do women and men view the project and what it offers to them? For those involved, details of specific activities ( the way in which respondent got involved, how things evolved, difficulties) – a kind of individual process reconstruction.
2. Changes in attitudes, relationships and behavior over the last 2 years, how they linked to the project.
3. Changes in well being (*material*- e.g. hunger, income, *psychological* – self-esteem, confidence and *social* e.g. relationships, status). How they are linked to the project.
4. Changes in local formal and informal structures and institutions (flexibility, consultation, representation, changes in rules)
5. Main changes for women’s empowerment and gender relations as a result of project
6. Challenges and constraints to reaching objectives and what could be done better



Preparing for field work

A corresponding list was used to organize the feedback of field work findings, in short:

1. Knowledge of or involvement with activities of Nijera (and why)
2. Process as perceived
3. Changes in: attitudes, behavior and relationships  
material, psychological and social well-being  
and how they are linked to project
4. Changes in local (formal and informal) structures, and how they are linked to project

5. Changes in women’s empowerment and gender relations
6. Challenges
7. What can be improved and how

### 2.3 Methods

Nineteen focus group discussions were held, with groups of natural leaders and interest groups, and the elected members monitoring group. Most included an impact scoring exercise or a Venn-diagram-inspired discussion of institutional change. Five participation stories were documented of Natural Leaders four of other women who CARE staff considered had been particularly empowered by Nijera. A total of 38 interviews were carried out: 27 with *para* residents who were not Natural Leaders nor involved in Nijera committees and interest groups; and the rest with elected officials, NGOs and selected elite members, including landlords. Finally, two local markets were visited/observed. Table 1 presents the individuals and groups included in the SII and the specific methods used with each. Table 2 contains site-specific details.

**Table 1: SII participants and methods**

SII participants	Methods
Natural leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group discussions with institutional analysis</li> <li>• Individual women’s participation stories</li> </ul>
Interest groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group discussion with impact scoring</li> <li>• Individual women’s participation stories</li> </ul>
<i>Para</i> residents (not NLs or interest group members)	Individual interviews
Selected ‘elite’ residents	Individual interviews
Elected members/chairman	Interviews
Elected members monitoring group	Focus group discussion
Social development NGOs working in the selected sites	Interviews



Men’s Focus Group

During the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with natural leaders, the institutions and organizations referred to in the discussion were noted on cards. At the end of the main discussion, the cards were used to further discuss the nature of institutional changes they had referred to and any relationship with Nijera activities.



During the FGD with interest group members, the changes in women’s empowerment referred to in the discussion were noted on cards and used to carry out a scoring exercise for the progress they had observed and to further discuss if and how these changes were related to Nijera activities.

Women’s Focus Group

The scoring system used by the researchers was not always the same, partly due to lack of time to practice the tool, but the exercises always yielded interesting discussion and insights.

*Para* residents (women and men) from different well being categories, who were not directly involved in interest groups were selected randomly from lists of residents according to well being categories. The Nijera well being analyses carried out in each of the four *paras*, updated where possible, are contained in Annex 4 along with an explanation of the categories. The objective of these interviews with a wider group of residents was to understand their perceptions of Nijera and any changes they had witnessed. A mix of Hindu and Muslim residents were selected, to see if there were appreciable differences in their views. Given the small sample, it was not possible to select on the basis of age, and we found that young people were under-represented in the spread. Although better off households in category A and B were included, further interviews were carried out with specific elite members who were known to be powerful or who had been referred to as influential and/or involved in Nijera in some way.

Individual participation stories were included to shed light on empowerment processes – they document some background, without being a full life history of the woman, and move on to the story of her involvement in Nijera and any changes she has experienced. Individual women who were Natural Leaders or who were known to have improved their well being category were included.

Two local markets were visited to observe the extent of women’s presence and their interactions and to talk to informants, such as stallholders, on an informal basis.

Table 2 presents the site and *para* specific number of interviews and focus groups/ exercises.

**Table 2: Site specific methods**

SII participants	Jalagari cluster Madhya <i>para</i>	Jalagari Uttar <i>para</i>	Mankira	Mankira Dhakin <i>para</i>
Natural leaders	FGD NLs network FGD women	FGD men Interview 1 woman NL	FGD NLs from all <i>paras</i> FGD men	FGD men FGD (2) women

	FGD men 3 Participation stories	(and her participation story)	FGD women 1 participation story	
Interest groups	FGD sanitation/health group FGD IGA committee FGD pond fish/ginger	FGD sanitation/road committee	FGD <i>Khas</i> fish pond FGD Wages/fistful of rice group	FGD savings group FGD wages/fistful of rice
<i>Para</i> residents	8 Individual interviews (women and men, 4 wealth categories)	5 individual interviews (women and men, 3 wealth categories)	8 individual interviews (women and men, 4 wealth categories)	6 individual interviews (women and men, 4 wealth categories).
Selected elite members	1 Muslim local leader (man, A category) 1 Muslim large landlord (man A category)		1 large landlord, Muslim (nearby <i>para</i> resident) 2 wives of landlords	

Non-*para* specific SII activities included:

- The chairman of Mohadpur union was interviewed (Jalagari cluster) and two elected members of Sujalpur union (one man and one woman) for the Mankira cluster.
- Staff from the NGO Gono Chetona and BRAC, active in Jalagari were interviewed and PAUP and BASE which are active in Mankira.
- A focus group discussion was held with the elected members monitoring group, where four men and three women participated from the various unions that Nijera works in: Rajendrapur (Rangpur District), Saptibari (Lalmonirhat District), Hosseinpur (Gaibanda District), and Botlagari (Nilphamari District).
- Observation and informal discussion in Amlagachi market (for Jalagari) and Mohugaon Boitali market (for Mankira)

After all the field work was completed, a group discussion was held with the six CARE facilitators working in the two selected sites to discuss what they had learnt from the SII and how it could be useful in their ongoing work.



Group work for the synthesis session

As with the Jalagari research and the VAW-PHL, a synthesis session with the full research team served to pool and discuss reflections and draw out lessons for women's empowerment, while aiming to contribute to the capacity of CARE staff to work for women's empowerment.

### **3. Impact Inquiry: Key findings**

There is little doubt that Nijera has facilitated a process of empowering community-led development. In both Jalagari and Mankira, in the main *paras* where Nijera began work less than two years ago, the natural leaders and interest groups demonstrate confidence and energy, and a positive attitude to resolving problems and furthering their interests. While there have been many tangible improvements in material well being, women and men we spoke to focused on changes in confidence, self-esteem, better relations between women and men, poor and better off, and an ability to negotiate with the more powerful as much as the changes in hygiene, health, hunger and income. In the categories of power, Nijera participants referred to power within, power to and power with.

The main issue for this SII, however, is whether Nijera promotes the self-realization of poor rural women as well as men, and helps women to articulate their own vision of development, and to strengthen their capacity to act in pursuit of their self-defined goals (as defined in the project aims). In gender jargon, the question is whether gender is mainstreamed in the Nijera process. From a personal perspective, it was exciting to see the level to which the Nijera approach and methodology has promoted women's capabilities and changed their individual and collective agency and relations. The project is not planned to directly engage with issues which specifically disempower women, such as gender-based violence, dowry or marriage norms; and yet some of these issues came up without the researchers asking any direct questions; for example, a reduction in gender-based violence was cited as one of the positive changes for women. The constraints women face, in the Bangladesh context, should not be underestimated and there are lessons and project choices to make in the future which will affect how much women can and do benefit in relation to men, but the overall picture of women's involvement and benefits is far more real on the ground than many projects which claim to be empowering women or mainstreaming gender equity.

#### **3.1 Project approach/activities and women's involvement**

There was remarkable consistency in the descriptions of the approach which Nijera takes in the narratives of the women and men involved with the project, but also in that of other *para* residents, elites, UP officials and NGOs working in the area. It was widely known that CARE staff begin by organizing meetings at *para* level, explaining their role and bringing people together to map their *para* and identify problems. We were told time and time again that "CARE does not give out things", "CARE does not resolve our problems, we resolve them"; "CARE

supports us and gives us ideas”, “CARE encourages us to sit and discuss our problems and work together”. When discussing changes in their own behavior with union members, one member pointed out that CARE had also changed its approach! What Nijera is doing is therefore highly unusual in relation to the work of most NGOs, but it also means that, as a participant of the elected members’ monitoring group pointed out, “people are used to getting things from NGOs and it is a challenge to change this way of thinking.”

The entry strategy, CLTS, is important in enabling women to actively participate from the beginning. The objective to achieve 100% sanitation, in what can be termed a ‘public good’, is a powerful way to bring people together. Total sanitation not only benefits all *para* residents (better off and poor alike), it also particularly benefits women. This is not only because of issues of privacy which are important for women, but may also be because women spend so much time in their *paras* compared to men, and are more directly responsible for caring for sick children and other household members.

In the CLTS process, women and men who are enthusiastic, outgoing, with good interpersonal skills and a motivation to mobilize people for the common good, emerge as natural leaders. As activities develop and groups are formed, more NLs emerge. Most are also people with socially validated specialist knowledge or skills, such as horticulture, aquaculture or labor leaders. While most are women and men from poorer groups, there are also those from better-off groups who become committed to the community-led process. Women are as well or better represented than men as Table 3 shows for the four SII sites in Mankira and Jalagari. In the two Mankira *paras*, where Hindus predominate in poorer groups, they are in the overwhelming majority.

**Table 3: Basic data on the NLs in the four SII *paras***

<i>Para</i>	Number	Number by well-being category	Number by gender	Number by religion
Jalagari – Madhya All Muslim <i>para</i>  70 households in total	13	5 ‘B’ (1 woman was a ‘C’) 3 ‘C’ (1 woman and 1 man were ‘D’) 5 ‘D’ (1 woman was an ‘E’)	7 women 6 men	All Muslim
Jalagari – Uttar <i>para</i> 26 households	5	3 ‘C’ 2 ‘D’	2 women 3 men	All Muslim
Birgonj – Mankira 74 households: 65 Hindu and 9 Muslim.	10	2 ‘B’ 3 ‘C’ 4 ‘D’ 1 elite man	5 women 5 men	9 Hindu 1 Muslim (sympathetic landlord)
Birgonj- Dhakin 60 households: 46 Hindu and 14 Muslim	5	3 ‘C’ 2 ‘D’	3 men 2 women	Women Hindu Men Muslim

Women’s age varies between 25 and 55 years. Young single and recently married women are not represented and may have more difficulties coming forward – this may be linked to issues of status when they have been in their husbands’ *para* for



long and also issues of workload. Or it may be a question of the activities in these areas, as there are adolescent girls in other Nijera sites.

Sanitation is a highly visible achievement which serves as an inspiration to residents in other *paras*. When sanitation is nearly complete, NLS usually with the support of CARE staff organize events that publicize what has been achieved, and then provide guidance as others in neighboring *paras* begin to follow their example. We were told several times that the fact that poor *paras* can achieve total sanitation serves to mobilize others, as *paras* which are less poor feel both inspired and shown up by the success.

As sanitation proceeds, facilitators work up a well being analysis to gain an understanding of the livelihood strategies of different socio-economic groups in the community. It also illustrates the dependency relationships, such as sharecropping, employment, assistance in times of crisis and money lending. In Mankira, it became apparent that thirty of the poorest households depended on three landowners for employment, loans and advance wages (SDU, 2005, Mankira report). In Mankira, there were difficulties in getting two local clubs to work together on sanitation, a problem which has now been resolved. The first collective action, after CLTS was attempted, was to restore a disused pond, based on a negotiation with a relatively wealthy household that owned it (ibid). The pond activity brought the poorest households of the two clubs together and ultimately led to cooperation. Women were actively involved in this initiative, and in the following action on wage increases. Since women constitute a high proportion of day laborers - their interest in obtaining not only higher wages, but wages equal to men and their success (though there may well be exceptions), was an important mobilizing force. It has given them greater confidence and produced tangible benefits for their households in the form of increased income.

In each *para* included in the SII, a range of activities have been organized collectively. The focus group discussions with interest groups yielded detailed accounts of how these developed, but the important point to note for now (see Table 4) is that women are involved in almost all the activities and they take the lead on many. Activities which have been developed draw on existing skills in the community and often also revive and develop past practices, usually in a more systematic and collective way. For example, vine potatoes were cultivated by some households, but the initiative of developing their production in greater quantities and by obtaining land, (by gift or lease), from better off households developed through Nijera. The idea of regularly saving a fistful of rice, and storing it for lean times, is also one that was used in the past. However, the practice was revived in Mankira *para*, when women discussed how they might cope in the short term if landlords refused to employ labor from the *para* if they asked for higher wages. The cross visits which Nijera organizes help to spread such ideas and practice between communities. In this way, the idea of saving rice was taken up in Jalagari, for seasonal hunger periods; the technique for vine potato production was taken in Uttar *para* and so on.

One unexpected finding was that better-off households, but more specifically, women in such households also adopt some of the activities which are initiated by poor women. The individual interviews carried out with better-off women not involved in the project, particularly in the main *paras*, revealed that better-off women have more regularly planted homestead vegetables, or engaged more systematically in income-generating activities, as a result of seeing poorer women take initiatives to better their own and their households' well being.

**Table 4: Women’s involvement in activities**

<b>Jalagari: Madhya para (since October 2004)</b>	<b>Jalagari: Uttar para (since December 2005)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanitation 100% (women and men)</li> <li>• Vine potato production (women and men)</li> <li>• IGA groups for rickshaw vans, tailoring, vegetable trade, rice processing, poultry drawing on credit fund (women and men)</li> <li>• ‘Fistful of rice’ saving rice daily for the seasonal hunger period (women)</li> <li>• Savings group (women and men)</li> <li>• Production of bamboo mats and wall hangings (women)</li> <li>• Collective pond fish culture (women)</li> <li>• Collective land leasing and ginger cultivation (women and men)</li> <li>• Blood donations for leukemia patient (women and men)</li> <li>• Community health management: “We for our health” (women)</li> <li>• Collective organic composting (women)</li> <li>• Adult education (women)</li> <li>• Better wages through fair weighing of ‘taro’ (women)</li> <li>• Road repair (men)</li> <li>• Celebrating Victory Day (men)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanitation (women and men)</li> <li>• Vine potato production (women and men)</li> <li>• Savings group (women and men)</li> <li>• Production of bamboo mats and wall hangings (women)</li> <li>• Better wages through fair weighing of ‘taro’ (women)</li> <li>• Share rearing livestock</li> <li>• Road repair (men)</li> </ul>
<b>Mankira para (October 2004)</b>	<b>Dhakin para (since Dec 2005)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanitation (100%) (women and men)</li> <li>• Lease of <i>khas</i> pond (men and women)</li> <li>• Dredging of disused pond for group aquaculture (women and men)</li> <li>• ‘Fistful of rice’ saving for seasonal hunger period (women)</li> <li>• Wage increases and equal wages for women (women and men)</li> <li>• Conflict resolution (Hindu and Muslim) women</li> <li>• Vine potato production (women and men)</li> <li>• Income generating activities e.g. tailoring, jute mat production, vegetable production (men and women)</li> <li>• Fighting corruption for land registration (men)</li> <li>• Blanket distribution for the poorest (men and women)</li> <li>• Goat share-rearing (women and men)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanitation (not completed) (women and men)</li> <li>• Wage increases and equal wages for women (women and men)</li> <li>• Vegetable cultivation (women and men)</li> <li>• Savings group (women), 22 members</li> <li>• Tube well installation (men)</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blood donations for leukemia patient (women and men)</li> <li>• Better links with service providers e.g. reopening a school and livestock vaccinations (men and women)</li> </ul>	
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In the two extension *paras* we included in the SII, where Nijera has been working for less than a year, the community-led process is not as developed, and this is reflected in the number of activities carried out (see Table 4). There is an important associated issue of how Nijera spreads and the levels of facilitation and support required, by CARE and Natural Leaders (which will be discussed later).

The Nijera approach firmly encourages agency on the part of disadvantaged groups and actively discourages dependency on CARE. While the cornerstone of the approach is facilitation, I would argue that, at least in the 2 main *paras* included in the SII, strategically timed and managed cash grants (very small in terms of many development projects), have had a critical role in supporting the empowerment of poor groups, both women and men. This financial support does not have to come at the beginning, but in a timely fashion. Clearly, this is a problematic issue and one which needs further discussion, as there are problems of raising expectations in these and other *para*, once it has been granted.

In Jalagari, a rotating fund of Tk50,000 was provided because there had been a flash flood (October 2004) which destroyed crops in nearby fields and many households (28 of the 95 households in the *para*) were suffering hunger, with five households literally starving. This fund served to provide interest-free loans for small businesses, many of which were critical in raising very poor households out of poverty, in a way that would simply not have been possible using loans from NGOs providing credit or from money lenders. These 28 households which benefited from the loans then formed a savings group (with a majority of women members) to manage their businesses and repay their loans.



*Khas* pond in Mankira

In Mankira, the long-standing dream of a group of poor households to obtain a nearby *khas* pond was made possible, not only because of their determination, organization and monetary contributions, but because CARE was willing to contribute (Tk20,000) to the costs of obtaining the lease. Mankira residents had extracted a public promise from the chairman to allow them to participate in the open bidding process, when a mass gathering was held to celebrate their progress with sanitation and

wages. However, when it later came to the bidding process, the chairman was unable to withstand the pressure from two elected members (see section 2.1) The price was deliberately hiked up by elites to prevent poor households from succeeding in the auction and CARE intervened. The grant was provided in May 2006, and the effects of winning that struggle on people’s morale was still visible at the time of this SII.

### 3.2 Women's empowerment: Changes in agency and relations

Agency, relations and structure are very inter-related, but as discussed (section 1.1) we have opted to treat agency and relations together and then focus on structure separately. Structures, consisting as they do of rules and norms which evolve over time and which serve powerful interests, are obviously more difficult to change in any meaningful and sustained way. Inevitably, some level of change in particular norms are referred to in this section, but a fuller discussion will be left to the next section. The Nijera initiative particularly lends itself to a consideration of the full SII framework as its objectives are broad and empowerment related.

We tried to understand women's agency and relations using a range of methods and views from different actors. A good place to start is to discuss the experience and views of Natural Leaders who are so critical to the Nijera process. Below, we recount the 'participation stories' of one woman Natural leader in each of the main *paras* – a kind of individual process reconstruction from participants, complementing the project staff reconstructions which were prepared for the SIIs.

#### **Box 1: SB's story (Natural Leader, Mankira)**

SB is now 40 years old. At the age of 11 she married a boy from Dhuladangi. Her father did not give money as dowry for her marriage, but gave a chain and a bracelet. After one year of her marriage she divorced, as her husband had another wife and SB had been treated badly in his house. She returned to her father's residence, but he then gave her in marriage to a second man. That man was previously married but his first wife had died.

Once married again, SB had to work very hard. Her husband earned a living threshing mustard seed for oil and "he had her do the threshing work instead of a cow". Her husband then married another woman and after that started mistreating and torturing SB, burning her with hot spoons and cigarettes. On some days, he would not allow her to eat with him and his other wife. She stayed in the house for two years and had a daughter. When the child was one year old, she returned to her father's house. As a farmer, her father didn't earn much and he had many members in his family to care for, so SB had to work as an agricultural laborer. During this period she struggled to survive. One year after she had returned to her father's house, her daughter died of cholera. She could not afford to give her daughter any medication. After her daughter's death, SB joined her father's family. For the past 3 years, she has been living in a separate house but in the same compound.

When CARE people came to her *para*, she participated actively to most meetings because she thought that she could benefit from them. Now, she is involved with many initiatives in the *para*, such as sanitation work, 'equal wages', goat share rearing, blanket distribution, tree plantation, cleaning the *para*, , road repairing, alternative vegetable cultivation, pond cleaning and cultivation, protesting against land surveyors, 'fistful of rice' and poultry vaccination. She owns 2 cows, 1 chicken and 2 ducks.

SB now understands that open defecation is harmful. Upon learning this, SB felt sorrow as she believed she could have saved her daughter had she known more about sanitation. SB used to share a latrine with her brother's family as she could not afford a ring slab to set up her own. However, three days ago she was given ring slabs from the UP to set up her own latrine.

SB played a vital role in negotiating equal wages for women. During a sanitation meeting, the women NLs first identified and discussed the problem that wages did not adjust with the increase in living costs, and that landlords should raise their daily wage rates. They called a general meeting in the *para* to discuss this. Jalil, one of the influential NL and a land owner, was present at that meeting. The women said that unless they received equal wages, they would simply stop working. They mainly targeted Jalil as he was the most influential landowner of that *para*. Jalil said if they stopped working in his field, he would bring in labor from the neighboring *para*. SB and the women laborers went to the neighboring *para*, Dhakin and explained to the laborers that they were negotiating better terms. If they managed to get good wages, it would set a precedent and other laborers would also be able to benefit. Laborers (women and men) met Jalil several times to negotiate and finally convinced him. SB found that demanding equal wages was quite a challenge but they succeeded in the end.

SB's income has improved. She now grows vegetables and earns money by selling them at the market. In past she had to cut her sari into two pieces as she could not afford to buy new saris, but now she has enough saris to wear throughout the year. SB noticed that as wages have increased and women's wages have equalized with those of the men, *dadon* started to decrease. *Dadon* is a tied loan from a landlord/employer. Taking *dadon* meant repayment through future labor, but working for lower than market wages, in the season when labor is scarce.

Like her, most women used to be afraid of Jalil, as he was an ill-tempered man. They would go to his house in fear and had to simulate a coughing sound to signal that they had come for their wages. Women used to avoid an area where he might be sitting. But now the situation is completely different. There is a huge change in Jalil's behavior. He is now a well-wisher towards women, and because they sit together in the same meetings now, the relationship has improved a lot. SB believes that because people are united in the *para*, their knowledge and confidence have increased. Problems are discussed jointly and solutions are sought for together. SB thinks a craft business (e.g. *dhokra*) could create employment opportunities and increase her income and that of many women of the *para*.

The discussion with the wages/fistful of rice interest group showed how SB's account underplays the role she had, the length of the process and the challenges that were overcome. SB called and led a meeting of all women laborers in Mankira, before the general meeting with men. They strategically chose which landowner (medium sized, in Mankira rather than Modhunpur where the largest landlords live). They chose harvesting time for the negotiations, when landlords need labor. When SB and others first approached Jalil, he did not agree and actually hired labor from Dhakin. The women then had to persuade those laborers to stop working. This was not easy, trying to catch laborers going to work, confronting their doubts and persuading them. They saved 'fistfuls of rice' to be prepared to go without work for a month, without going hungry. In Dhakin *para*, the women had to prove they could work as hard as the men and deserved equal wages (see p 25). Women and men finally negotiated with Jalil that they would be paid on a group contract basis at an individual rate of Tk 50 per day (was Tk25 for women and Tk 35 for men). The wage negotiations then spread to laborers in other *paras* and other landlords, with Jalil supporting their claims.

### **Box 2: B's story (Natural Leader, Madhya para)**

B is 52 years old and was married at the age of 12. Soon after the marriage, her husband's parents wanted her to divorce their son, as she could not get Tk. 3000 from her father as a dowry. Her husband however did not want a divorce and they decided to move to B's father's house. (B was interviewed during the first study and at that time, she explained how her husband's first wife was killed because of dowry issues. Her husband did not want to go through that again and that is why he took the step of leaving his family)

There they had a separate *khana*. B's husband worked as an agricultural laborer and found work in other districts. During that time, B stayed in their home as a housewife. Here she had two daughters. After the second child was born, the living costs of her family increased, so B started to work in a *biri* (cigarette) factory and her husband worked as a *van-wallah*. About five years later, her husband's grandmother persuaded her in-laws to have them back and they returned to her husband's *para*. They built a new house there. Her husband worked as an agricultural laborer and she worked as maid servant and started working on *Kantha* (quilting), but the income generated from *Kantha* was not much. After a few years living in the new house, her husband had severe back problems and could not work. B had to really struggle to make ends meet. B now has 3 sons and 4 daughters.

B went to a meeting called by CARE where they were preparing a social map of the *para* and sanitation work was planned. What attracted her to the process was that it focused on the poor people. She immediately wanted to be involved. When the sanitation work was stopped due to flooding and *monga* (seasonal hunger period). She was one of the five families which were starving at the time, and received assistance from CARE. When *monga* was over, she went to the market and bought the materials needed for her family's latrine. Her son dug the hole and she installed the latrine herself. She also took a loan of Tk 2,000 from the CARE fund and bought a rickshaw van for her youngest son. (Her husband wanted to use the loan for his vegetable business but she argued with him). Now her son earns Tk 40–50 per day, which helps the family a lot.

B now cultivates vine potatoes. She started cultivating first on her homestead but then also on a land collectively leased by a group of women. The vine potato initiative emerged from an analysis of what could be done to stop *monga*. On the leased land, there was a pond sitting idle. Rahima, a woman NL, Shaymoli and herself approached the landlord about using the pond for cultivation. The women had formed a savings group, and by collecting Tk 5 per week, they had enough savings to stock the pond with fish. B is also involved with saving a Fistful of Rice. She is also working to clean and prepare Taro for marketing. She has started rearing poultry. B sells poultry to buy rice, and sometimes to pay her loan installments. But usually she uses the income from the rickshaw van money to repay her loan. B has repaid in full the first loan she had (Tk 2,000). Now she has now taken another one of Tk 2,500. Though B has freedom over her income, she still consults her family. She spends money on saris, soap and oil.

Being involved in these activities, means B does not have to work as a maid servant. As a maid servant, she would get one meal per day and ½ kg of rice (value = Tk 9). Earlier, B and her family could only meet half of their needs, and now they eat at least 2 full nutritious meals per day. There is more food available and her physical condition has greatly improved. Her homestead and surroundings are clean. She can buy clothes; in the past she wore a sari for three years and had to darn it continuously and now she can buy a new sari every year. People used to call her to work as a servant during marriage

ceremonies and now she is invited as a guest and even takes a present. She did not used to go to the hospital, unaware that she could get free medicine. Now she visits the hospital and when her son's wife became pregnant she made sure that she went for treatment. She also goes to the veterinary hospital for her livestock. She approached a union member to explain that her husband is disabled and now receives a Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) card.

The unity of the NLs and the better relationships in the *para* have given her the courage to speak in front of anyone. Even when the police comes she feels comfortable to speak to them – earlier she would not have had the courage. B often interacts with the other natural leaders and participates in many initiatives, although she doesn't want to be a leader. She says it is because she is getting old, has a lot of household work and must take care of her husband who is not well.

B and the other women NLs faced some resistance to their work: people did not want to listen to them. When they went to Mankira (cross visit) Rangpur NL workshop, a couple of better-off families said that they would be converted to Christianity and be stamped. Some people questioned the need for CARE's presence. B had understood that the process was about fighting poverty and tried to explained this to her husband and to others who had offered resistance. She thinks that those who had started rumors and created problems were not from poor families. Some criticized her work and involvement with CARE; but she answered back that she had the consent of her family for every single activity she was involved in.

B says there have been many positive changes, but she believes there could be even more. She would like to have a livestock farm and would like to do rice sharecropping.

Although we held separate focus groups, the accounts of change from natural leaders and interest groups are very similar. In Madhya *para*, for example, working together on sanitation and on vine potato production brought the 28 poor households together and this group then dealt with the hunger problem and used the revolving fund from CARE for small businesses. Thus, natural leaders are in each of the interest groups, since the group develops collective strategies and alliances with others to deal with specific issues. For example, when a child died of diarrhea and another was very ill, they were concerned about the treatment the child had received in hospital and women decided to go to together to complain. With the advice of CARE facilitators, they approached the TNO and this action resulted in better relations with health service providers, and the formation of a community health committee in the *para*.

Table 5 organizes all the main changes in women's agency and relations identified in the NL and interest group discussions, using the broad sub-dimensions of the global SII framework, explaining and adding dimension (in italics) where necessary. The differences between sites and among women will then be discussed.

**Table 5: Findings on different dimensions of women's empowerment**

<b>Agency-based</b>	
<b>SII framework</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Self-image, self esteem	Women are less inhibited and more confident. They used to be hesitant to talk to men, male elites and people in authority.

Information/skills	<p>They have gained courage (shahosh) and NLs in particular, see themselves as actors in development.</p> <p>Women have learnt to express themselves better. They have acquired new information and agricultural production techniques. NL women's role in supporting sanitation and other activities in other <i>paras</i> has given them a lot of pride, they have learnt to take responsibility and are respected for it.</p>
Employment/control of labor	<p>Women contribute more to household income, some engaging in IGAs for the first time. Negotiating for better wages (fair weighing for taro in Jalagari/Uttar and day labor wages in Mankira/Dhakin).</p> <p>In Jalagari, selling labor on a daily basis has decreased and reliance on maidservant work has reduced (more options for income)</p>
Mobility in public space	<p>Generally increased but still highly variable among women. More women go to mass gatherings and meetings outside their <i>paras</i>. Markets are a particular difficult environment for women. The jute mats produced by groups of women are sold by men in nearby markets. However, more women are going shopping individually for their clothes than in the past. More women go to hospital (in groups).</p> <p>Women in Madhya and Mankira said they wanted greater mobility. Women involved in IGAs in Madhya <i>para</i> said they wanted to access markets further away e.g. Polishbari.</p>
Group membership/activism	<p>Women are more united, they belong to groups/ more groups and organize collectively to be effective. In mixed groups with men, they are gaining respect and confidence.</p>
Material assets owned/ <i>increased income</i>	<p>Higher incomes for women (Madhya, Mankira and Dhakin, Uttar – not yet). Less dependence on loans (from NGOs and moneylenders) and tied loans from employers in Mankira/Dhakin.</p> <p>Women can wear better and cleaner clothes (e.g. new saris rather than an old one torn into two pieces)</p>
<i>Food security</i>	<p>Vine potato production, increased vegetable (and fruit) production. 'Fistful of rice' savings. Women contributing actively to household food security and the number of regular meals have increased in all 4 sites. This is 'empowering' in that women are</p>



<p>Educational attainment (<i>literacy</i>)</p> <p>Bodily health/integrity</p> <p>Decision-making and influence in household finance and child rearing</p> <p>Legal/rights awareness</p> <p><i>Ability to give to others (contributing to community life)</i></p>	<p>responsible for putting the food on the table, yet were very dependent on men to provide it in a timely manner.<sup>7</sup> The quality of food has also improved e.g. in Dhakin, vegetables are now eaten daily in meals.</p> <p>Literacy has increased (Jalagari – children attending school more regularly)</p> <p>Household health has improved and there is little diarrhea. Gender-based violence has decreased.</p> <p>Husbands listen to wives more and are more convinced that they can make decisions</p> <p>Women are more aware of their rights in relation to the Union Parishad (e.g. social assistance) and service providers (especially health)</p> <p>Women emphasize the empowering nature of being able to give to others: advice, sharing of information and skills, presents at ceremonies.</p>
<b>Relational</b>	
<p>Consciousness of self/others as interdependent</p> <p>Pursuit of accountability</p> <p>Negotiation/accommodation habits</p>	<p>Relations between women and men, poor and rich at <i>para</i> level have improved. Frequent example: poor women are now invited to the weddings of richer households as guests (rather than helpers). In the past, “Women would come, men would move away. If poor would come, better off would move away”</p> <p>In Mankira and Dhakin <i>paras</i>, there is less competition between labor groups and more unity and distribution of opportunities. In Dhakin, Hindu and Muslim, rich, poor, women and men sit together at wedding ceremonies.</p> <p>Gaining skills and confidence in pursuing accountability from service providers, collectively rather than only as individuals.</p> <p>With husbands, male elites, elderly women and men – women involved in Nijera have struggled to get acceptance of their increased voice and new roles in collective</p>

<sup>7</sup> The saving of ‘fistfuls of rice’ also allows women more flexibility, since if men do not provide rice to cook a meal on time, they can ‘borrow’ from this stock. Note that in the research we did in Jalagari, one of the triggers of gender-based violence was women not having food ready when husbands expected it.

<p><i>Connectivity</i></p>	<p>development activities. The process is uneven, and at household level, women work to manage heavy workloads and gain acceptance to attend meetings/ work with men; i.e. for their activism.</p> <p>Women in Mankira and Dhakin who negotiated for better wages feel they have changed their ways of relating to landlords, they are much more aware of their collective negotiating power.</p> <p>Linked to mobility, women relating to each other, to men, to more powerful actors also gives women a sense of being connected to people and events outside the household, linking individual problems to wider society, and feeding back into increased agency.</p>
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The table above may give an over-rosy picture, because it implies all women involved in Nijera activities in all four *paras* experience these changes. The discussion below qualifies the picture.

Before the discussion, it should be pointed out that men in the groups of poor households have been empowered in relation to better off men and political structures. Many dimensions of empowerment referred to in the table would apply to men, with the notable exceptions of mobility, household decision making and bodily integrity. Men also use a range of collective strategies to be effective. A simple example: they found that if they asked to see the chairman as a group of 4 or 5 men, they were more likely to succeed.



Woman Natural Leader in Focus Group Discussion

The focus groups with male NLs supported the changes that women identified, and illustrated important points. The fact that women are actively contributing to household income and community well-being is a key factor in changing men's views about the capabilities and status of women. When women NLs in Madhya *para* were asked about challenges they faced, they explained that convincing husbands and

other *para* residents was difficult in the beginning. For example, some male members of households did not cooperate with the move to sanitize the *para*, and they worked through women in the household (e.g. we had examples of daughters and wives), to persuade the men. Women involved in Nijera were 'teased' and doubted, and they had to struggle to prove that they were doing something useful. In the Mankira discussion with NLs from 8 *paras*, we were told that "elites are now admitting that widows too can do things without guardians."

Men NLs reinforced the view that women and men work together much better now and more effectively. Women have gone to the hospital and since the CARE facilitators introduced them to the TNO, they have gone there themselves and achieved results. "A meeting at the TNO used to produce a trembling at the knees.. now women go much more confidently." On issues of mobility and markets, they pointed out how rich women could go to market maintaining purdah, but poor women used to be criticized. Now they go with a minimum of purdah (covering the head only) and people do not criticize.

In Madhya *para*, on gender-related issues, the men said that "quarreling and beating their wives used to be common – every day – because of hunger and stress. Now it is once a week." In Dhakin *para*, a man in the wages interest group explained that men used to think women would not survive the death of their husbands, now they think they would". One NL said he used to beat his wife when she spoke to other men but no longer does so. In Mankira, a woman NL explained how she called on a fellow NL to attend a meeting. The husband was there and offered to go instead of his wife. When the NL explained that this was their work, he agreed to let his wife go. As the wife put it, " Two years ago, that would have straight away resulted in a beating".

There are particular problems with women leaving their own *paras* to support other *paras*, although things seem to be slowly changing. As an NL in Mankira explained: "The first time I asked my husband on the day. He refused and I had to accept. The next time, I began to prepare him a few days in advance. I also make sure I organize food and housework before I leave."

The male Natural Leaders can be supportive of women's activism, (although we do not know if that always applies to women in their own households). As it was put in the Mankira FGD with men NLs "Everywhere, on TV, on radio we hear about equal rights for women and men. As we work together, we understand these things." The men who led the process of obtaining the *khas* pond in Mankira nominated a woman as chair of the committee to manage the pond, on the suggestion of a particularly active male NL. Although there is some indication that she does not always take the lead, it seems to have important symbolic significance.

In Dhakin, some men whose wives were not day laborers objected to women's attempts to get equal wages. Men wanted to keep the higher wages, saying men did more. One landlord tried to divide men and women, saying women are trying to grab men's rights. It was at this point that the women insisted on an analysis of what women and men did. Plowing and digging were only done by men but women said "...this is a socially defined thing – if "*samaj*" allowed it, we could do it. If men did not mind, we could do it." Women and men took a separate field each and they compared the results and showed they could do it. This shows the level of resistance -and women's determination. However, it is still unclear how universal the practice of equal wages is in the area at the present time. From interviews with *para* residents who were not so involved with Nijera, it would seem that women still earn much less than men as individual day laborers, but in group contracts, women do earn the same as men, so that women have benefited the most, from the general increase and the parity with men. Project information is that wage increases are taking place in seven *para*, involving 512 men and women, about half of whom are women. In Mankira, men and women are getting equal wages when they work individually, but this has not been clearly established in other *paras*, where wage increases are taking place in groups.

While the positive changes listed in the table apply to both extension paras (Uttar and Dhakin), the number of poor women to which they apply may be fewer and there are still many challenges. In the nearby extension Uttar *para*, where CARE and the NLs have worked for only nine months, the gains are fewer and the challenges still very present. It was only possible to interview one of the two women NLs. She was responsible for spreading the knowledge of vine potato production from Madhya *para* and convincing six households to start producing them; and she has also been active with the men NLs in the sanitation process. The work done by men and women to repair the road has meant that rickshaws can now access the *para*. As she explained " The road used to be a dike which people used for defecation. Relatives who came to visit had to get down from the rickshaw and walk in that dike. Now they can come right in to the *para* and this is a source of pride for us".

In Uttar *para*, the NL we spoke to feels that although she has greater voice and respect within her household and community, she still has to negotiate with her husband and 'take permission' to go out, she feels that her workload is heavy and she sometimes has to neglect her household chores. In addition, some people in her own and in neighboring *paras*, particularly elites and elderly men, have criticized her work with CARE, saying that she ought to be paid and others that CARE is trying to convert people to Christianity. This 'conversion' rumor persists despite the ingenious strategies that the NLs and CARE facilitators have used to show that it is untrue. In Dhakin *para*, the two women NLs who went to a CARE workshop were told they would be trafficked and never come back, but this kind of comment has stopped now.

Uttar *para* is not yet as united behind the Nijera process as Madhya *para*. NLs in Uttar *para* were keen for more support from CARE facilitators although they acknowledged that the NLs from Madhya *para* were an inspiration, especially Shaymoli who has gained a very good reputation. The sense from Dhakin residents involved in Nijera is somewhat different and the increased wages has resulted in clear gains in confidence. The Mankira experience really inspired Dhakin residents: "If Mankira can develop, why should we stay behind?"

The changes were summarized in the Mankira cluster NLs discussion: "Women's power (kamata) has increased. Husbands give us more respect and value us more. When new people come to the *para*, we go and see who it is (we used to hide); we are known in other *para* and we are being invited to weddings and social events and can take presents." In the same discussion, the top five overall changes as a result of the Nijera process were:

- Equal wages
- Protection against hunger
- Men and women working together
- Women's increase in courage and power
- Reduction in ill health

There have been substantial changes in material well being for poor households in the two main *paras* where Nijera has been active for almost two years. In Madhya *para*, Jalagari, many poor households have improved their well being category, as Annex 4 illustrates. The six poorest households, who were in the 'E' category have all improved their well being, so that there is no longer such an extremely poor category. In Mankira, nine households have moved from the extreme poor category to poor and twelve who were poor have moved to the middle category. The stories of two women who have improved their well-being substantially are included in Annex 5.

### 3.3 Women's empowerment: Changes in Structure

While we have already touched upon structures such as marriage, services and market accessibility, this section will look more closely at the nature of the changes and at a broader range of institutions. It is worth noting that in Nijera's discussion of "power structures", we have to consider more than political structures, since power operates in a range of institutions at different levels.

#### Access to Services

In general, women's understanding of their rights to access services and demand a reasonable level of treatment has increased. In Madhya *para*, women's complaints to the sub-district level office about the treatment received in a hospital led to improvements and the setting up of a primary health care clinic nearby, which is also used by Uttar *para* residents. Women's contact with the sub-district services is rare, as is this kind of demand for accountability.

Women used to access health services primarily with men, but as a result of the Nijera process, an increasing number access health services in groups and individually. In Dhakin *para*, women said they do not wait for family planning staff to visit, they actively seek information and services. In Jalagari, in particular, children – girls and boys- are said to be attending school more regularly, although we did not find out what is happening to adolescent girls.

More women are engaging with other social development NGOs working in their area, as a direct result of their involvement in Nijera. One of the strongest NLs (Shaymoli) has been asked to lead activities by another NGO.

#### Political structures

Women have gone with men to the Union Parishad as part of Nijera's activities, for example to ask for support with material for sanitation (Mankira, Madhya). Shaymoli from Madhya *para* is viewed as a role model in this respect – the chairman knows her name, and she has been entrusted with the distribution of social assistance cards (VGD and VFD), which was previously done by the UP on a patronage vote-buying basis. This has set a precedent for a more devolved system of distribution more accountable to the community.

While poor people, particularly Natural Leaders, may be engaging more with the UP, men more than women, it has not become more effective. In terms of their engagement, as one male NL put it: "We are able to stand at the window holding on to the grille, but we have not yet entered." In Mankira, the confidence of men involved in negotiating for the *khas* pond has increased, and the fact that it was ultimately conceded to them encourages men and women to demand their entitlements. The female elected member interviewed from Sujalpur union (see section 3.4), where Mankira is located, is dynamic and beginning to make a difference. She is an enthusiastic supporter of the Nijera process and has contributed in many ways. She intervenes in gender-based violence cases, and since being part of Nijera she made a commitment to attend *salish*, although it is sometimes difficult. She is now much more aware of her role and power as an elected member. In contrast, our earlier research in Mohadpur union outlines its corrupt nature; vote buying is common and elected members are much less active in defending people's rights.

Although Botlagari, where Nijera has worked for ten months, was not selected for the SII, the intensive work done there on governance issues is yielding results. It was possible to attend an evening meeting in this location, where Natural Leaders (women and men) sat with elected leaders and the chairman, had a chance to present the work they were doing and ask for greater accountability of political structures.

One view (male) in the discussion with NLs from 9 of the 14 *paras* in the Jalagari cluster was that women do not yet have the confidence to question the chairman as men do. Men were at the forefront of taking action against corruption in the land registration work in Mankira and making demands for transparency and accountability. It is clear that women still have even further to go than men in exercising their citizenship rights.

One aim of the Nijera approach is to create a cumulative effect in which poorer men and women from different communities begin to build a unified force that can become a powerful pressure group for the UP. The aspiration is that by the time of the next UP elections (1 ½ years from now), votes will not be bought in Nijera areas, members will be elected from within NLs and corrupt chairmen will have a tough time winning.

### **Access to justice: *Salish***

More women attend *salish* and may participate, but do not make decisions. Better-off women tend not to participate in *salish*. Two women in Madhya participated in a local dispute resolution process and a few women, including NLs, attended *salish* in Uttar *para*. Women involved in Nijera say they are beginning to be listened to, and men in Nijera share this view. In Dhakin *para*, women involved in Nijera are more confident to discuss issues with men – if they are told to stop speaking in *salish* – they contest this: “ We have something to say about community issues, particularly if it relates to quarrels between women and men. In Dhakin *para*, when a man from a rich household beat a male laborer, the women insisted on a *salish* and the rich man had to ask for pardon (interestingly, this example was related by men NLs).

In Jalagari, an interview with an influential landlord and *salishkar* revealed that there have been few changes in *salish* as far as corruption goes – bribes are still used to influence decisions, a practice which clearly prejudices access to justice, particularly for poor groups.

The Nijera process has therefore facilitated women’s access to *salish*, even if they prefer to resolve things in other, more informal, forums than *salish*. The use of other forums also contests the ability of the elite to dominate dispute resolution, and use *salish* to further their own interests.

### **Access to markets**

Even the brief visits to a market near each site revealed what problematic places they are for women. In Boitali (Mankira), we were told that many more women are seen at the market since day laboring increased, which indicates that such mobility may be associated with poverty and the need for income. In both Boitali and Amlagachi (Jalagari) markets, the committees which run markets are corrupt in the way in which members are selected and funds are managed. In Amalgachi, for which CARE has built infrastructure and created women’s corners under the Integrated Food Security Program in 2001, many women who had been allocated

allotments are no longer using them or using them very irregularly. Against the odds, and through enormous personal struggle, one woman has proved to be a successful business woman. However, she has been forced out of the committee for complaining about the misuse of funds. She was of the opinion that women who received allotments had not been wisely selected and that many able women had not been chosen.

Male shop owners in this market are against women using the market (especially since it functions at night) and were against women shopkeepers, questioning their character. This may also be related to the men wanting those allocations. CARE field staff are aware that at night, there are activities such as gambling, drug and alcohol sales, women and children trafficking, and prostitution at night. In Amlagachi, staff is aware that all of these (except for women and children trafficking) take place. It could well be that if women start claiming the market as a space, men from nearby would insist that such activities stop. This would result in a loss of revenue to market committees who allow these activities to happen in return for money, as do elected members, the chairman, and the police. This set of issues explain the ambivalence in women's view of markets and indicate that there is a real struggle ahead if women are to have access to markets both as entrepreneurs and as consumers.

### **Marriage and kinship rules and norms/ societal norms**

Some women, now that they are earning income, feel able to spend money without consulting their husbands, for example, with hawkers who come to the *para*. Although such shopping is usually related to household needs, they also spend money on personal needs, with saris being cited as the most common example.

More men are willing to help with work which was previously seen to be entirely a woman's responsibility. Examples we were given included taking care of livestock and helping with housework if the wife is sick.

*Samaj* in Madhya *para* is more accepting of women's mobility than in the past. Views about women's role in public is changing, when it is to do with income generation and development activities which bring benefits to the community. In Mankira, Hindu leaders are now paying more attention to the views of poor men and women, and see them as more organized and articulate.

One specific change seems to be in how widows and divorced women are viewed. They used to be neglected and stigmatized, but there is some change in the level of respect they get. Contrary to societal norms, it is now better acknowledged that they can live independent lives and improve their own situation; and a number of widows and divorced women are Natural Leaders, leading processes of community development.

### **3.4 Wider views of Nijera's impact on women's empowerment**

So far, we have focused mainly on participant views i.e. of poor women and men engaged in Nijera activities, and triangulated by asking similar questions of different individuals and groups. This section discusses the views of *para* residents, selected (randomly) from a list of names from the well-being analysis (women and men, and where relevant Hindus and Muslims). In addition, we analyze the views of UP members and the Jalagari chairman, social development NGOs working in the project areas, selected members of elite residents in the *paras* visited.

**Para residents**

Due to time constraints, we were only able to interview a small sample of residents (Table 6). Although their views were very useful, it would have been better to interview a bigger sample, to have greater confidence in how representative the views are and to be able to analyze issues of age and generation. What is offered here are tentative findings, some of which can be usefully looked into in the future.

**Table 6: Number and characteristics of respondents by para**

<b>Mankira (12)</b>	<b>Dhakin (6)</b>	<b>Madhya (8)</b>	<b>Uttar (5)</b>
<p><b>4 women:</b> B, Hindu, 45 yrs, C, Hindu, 30 yrs, D, Hindu, 25 yrs, D, Christian, 28 yrs</p> <p><b>4 men:</b> B, Hindu, 48 yrs, C, Hindu, 55 yrs, E, Hindu, 50 yrs, E, Hindu, 27 yrs</p> <p><b>Selected elite:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Hindu man - leader</li> <li>• 1 Muslim man large landlord</li> <li>• 1 Muslim B woman ex-NGO worker</li> <li>• 1 Muslim B woman (Jalil's wife)</li> </ul>	<p><b>3 women:</b> B, Muslim, 28 yrs, C, Hindu, 44 yrs, D, Muslim, 25 yrs,</p> <p><b>3 men:</b> C, Hindu, 48 yrs, D, Hindu, 38 yrs, E, Hindu, 42 yrs.</p>	<p><b>4 women:</b> A, Muslim, 45 yrs B, Muslim, 38 yrs C, Muslim, 30 yrs D, Muslim, 17 yrs</p> <p><b>4 men:</b> A, Muslim, 63 yrs A, Muslim, 52 yrs B, Muslim, 20 yrs C, Muslim, ?</p>	<p><b>3 women</b> A, Muslim, 30 yrs C, Muslim, ? D. Muslim, 38 yrs</p> <p><b>2 men:</b> B, Muslim, 30 yrs C. Muslim, 28 yrs</p>

In the main *paras*, in both clusters, residents who may not be directly or extensively involved in Nijera activities have a good knowledge of the activities and are almost without exception very positive about Nijera and what is being achieved, particularly for poorer groups of residents. In Jalagari, respondents were not only well informed and positive about sanitation, which they all appreciate, but they can list the activities that poor households have engaged with in the Nijera process. This is the same in Mankira. In Mankira, the high proportion of participants involved in the *khas* pond leasing as well as sanitation, made it difficult to find respondents who were not involved with Nijera activities in some way.

The kinds of changes in women's agency and relations which we documented earlier are echoed and overwhelmingly corroborated by these interviews. On sanitation, one man clearly laid the success with women's agency "...many people have tried before, but the women succeeded in pushing the initiative forward; I can now go to my field on a clean path". Most people interviewed from better off households made the comment that loans and requests for food and help from poor households had reduced, attesting to the increased material well being, particularly in Madhya, Mankira and Dhakin *paras*.

Across all four *paras*, however, women are more unequivocally positive than men about the changes for women. To illustrate, both the better off women (A and B categories), interviewed in Madhya, were not only positive about Nijera, but had been inspired to make changes their own lives, such as planting vine potatoes



and trying to help (following Shaymoli's example) when there are problems in the *para*. One, the wife of a madrassa teacher, had actively assisted in persuading landlords (men) to give land to poor women for collective production and to give women vegetable (*taro*) processing work. The other feels she would like to have Shaymoli's confidence to go to service providers - she goes with her husband or brother-in-law and would be like 'a boat without a rudder' if she went alone. In Mankira, another two women (B and a D category converted Christian) have increased their vegetable production. This indicates that women in better-off households may be more likely (than men) to be allies of the initiative, persuading their menfolk to assist and counteracting resistance, as well as trying to make gains for themselves on some fronts, for example, mobility. However, there are exceptions. One man was motivated into planting fruit trees on his land and perhaps linked to age, a young woman of 17 years (D category) with a baby would love to attend meetings but her mother-in-law, rather than her husband, objects. This finding of support from women in better-off households also points to the gender-based subordination that they experience themselves.

While some men are supportive of women's increased agency and expanding relationships, there is considerable resistance from men who tend to be from better off households/the elite. To illustrate, an A category man in Jalagari was adamant that women should not participate in *salish*, the same is true of two Muslim men in Mankira (B and C), who also feel that it is a dishonor for Muslim women to work in the fields and that they should be involved in *para* level IGAs only. The latter added that their mobility was also because their men could not control them. A rich landowner (Tamijuddin) does not think that women deserve equal wages and that they should not attend *salish*. In a different vein, he felt that wife-beating was inhuman and the incidence is reducing as women and men are educated. This may indicate the effects of the general context in which NGOs, the government and the media are working to reduce gender-based violence.

The role of Jalil in Mankira, prior to Nijera, also emerged very clearly from these interviews. He enforced *purdah* in Mankira and women, both Hindu and Muslim, were very afraid of him. They would take care to avoid him if they left the house and would not use the grocery store in the *para*, if he was there. Jalil's wife used to provide help to poor Hindu families but had to hide it from Jalil because he disapproved of her helping others. She gave detailed examples of this. Jalil is said to have really changed since his involvement in various Nijera activities. He is now more approachable and sits with women in meetings. Jalil's wife and another woman who is an ex-NGO member have been discussing how they can help the *para* to develop and also how they can increase their own mobility.

In Uttar *para* too, the one category A woman who was interviewed explains that she has been motivated to take a greater interest in the *para*, and to try and resolve problems outside of *salish*. She would like to attend meetings but her husband forbids it. A man in category B supports women's mobility (to contribute to household income) but does not want his own wife to go out. One woman (C) in Uttar *para* who works hard as a maidservant and in seasonal rice processing, does not know anything about the project and does not want to. Another (category D), acknowledges the achievements of sanitation and curbing hunger, and is using the hospital more after Nijera. Another man (C) does not want his wife to attend meetings, citing her workload and possible 'fights between women' as reasons.

In Dhakin *para*, the negotiations with landlords and increase in wages is well known. All three women (B, C and D) interviewed were very positive about the new skills and confidence women have, and the positive changes in their material well being. In the case of the C and D women, they were both too busy to

participate and in all three cases, did not really know the process. The man (C) approved of the cleaner environment and the fact that women are getting basic literacy but his wife is a housewife and he thinks women should stay at home . Both other men (D and E) are day laborers and have benefited from increased wages but did not know about other Nijera activities.

The knowledge of Nijera's approach and aims does not seem to be very widespread in Dhakin *para* and the level of support for Nijera may be lower in both the extension *paras*, Uttar and Dhakin. However, given that the project has only been active in the extension *paras* for nine months, this is not surprising. It does raise questions about the profile and success of the initiative when CARE is not as involved and leaves more to the Natural Leaders from the main *paras*. Closer involvement from CARE was a repeated request from the extension *paras*, although in the main *paras* too, women and men involved in Nijera activities expressed a need for CARE facilitation to take activities up to another level. Although they were referring mainly to activities to enhance livelihoods, we do need to consider what less CARE input also means for women's empowerment and gender equity (see section 4).

### **NGO views**

We were only able to interview two NGOs in each site, Mankira and Jalagari. In Mankira, PAUP uses a rights based approach and works on livelihoods, market access and reproductive health. It works in many of the same villages as CARE and the Director who was interviewed was the most knowledgeable about Nijera, having had discussions with Natural Leaders and other residents. BACE (Bangladesh Association for Community Education), on the other hand knew little about Nijera. The Chief Coordinator attends NGO coordination meetings at the *Upazilla* level and had heard about a sanitation initiative at one of these, but not much else.

The Director of PAUP was very positive about the approach taken and the results, confirming the benefits for women's increased income, confidence and status at household and *para* level. He voiced the view that gender-based violence was decreasing because women were earning an income. PAUP has developed a new proposal, with four other NGOs (which has been funded), to use a "community self-realization" process. This was inspired by Nijera.

In Jalagari, the NGO Gono Chetona works on sanitation and more recently on gender and human rights. The advocacy officer interviewed had visited Nijera 'fields' and was positive about the approach and results. He felt that women's voice had been increased and that the social environment was 'turning in favor of women' although he was also aware that women faced a lot of difficulties attending meetings in the beginning. It is Gono Chetona which has asked the NL, Shaymoli to facilitate sessions in the communities they work in and offered her monetary compensation to do so. BRAC was also approached (Polashbari office) but the person interviewed (working on health) knew very little about Nijera.

### **Views of elected representatives**

There were six members (4 men and 2 women) in the FGD with the elected members monitoring group, from five different locations. The group was formed a year ago. In each of their areas, they could point to community led activities which were improving the lives of the poorest members. They identified a series of changes, which we have discussed in section 3.2. In relation to women and the Nijera process, they prioritized:

- Increased voice

- Increased income
- Confidence to raise issues
- Women uniting and working together
- Emergence of women natural leaders (usually only men are leaders)

They said there had been a reduction in early marriage, and were very aware of government policies concerning this issue and more generally, for equal rights between women and men. They were aware of the pernicious effects of dowry, including violence against women, but could only make statements about this, not point to any changes. A member voiced the view that now political parties have started women’s committees at village level, things are changing in favor of women. A woman member, however, pointed out that although there is more acceptance of women’s activism and mobility, she still has to manage questions and doubts from her in-laws.

Having been through ‘capacity building’ provided by SDU and having witnessed changes in other areas through cross visits, they feel their attitudes have changed. The group made a plan for their own activities to support community development and now monitor its implementation. One male member pointed out how he only went to communities to get votes and distribute benefit cards, but he now feels he should be elected for supporting development work. The two members from Botlagari explained how accountability has increased in Botlagari, including the devolution of UP tax collection and use in a few communities.

The monitoring group sees one of its roles as spreading what is happening in some locations to others, expanding the work of the NLs. One of the challenges they identified for CARE was the need to develop NLs in extension *paras*, due to the time constraints faced by NLs in the main *paras*.

In the section on political structures, we referred to the support for Nijera’s approach of the female elected member interviewed from Sujalpur union, where Mankira is located. She was aware of the series of changes taking place in Mankira, and was spreading the approach in her area. She was particularly positive about women’s access to income and she sees Nijera as contributing to changes which have been taking place over the last five to seven years, where women are more able to assert their rights, for example, leaving a man if he is violent, and men are able to see women as more than their dependents.

### 3.5 Impact scoring: Some participatory numbers

We experimented with some impact scoring with the NLs and interest groups. The exercises provoked interesting discussions and the findings have been incorporated in the report. The actual exercises carried out varied, partly because time did not allow us to discuss and practice them sufficiently. However, some interesting numbers did emerge and a few examples are included here.

In Madhya *para*, the IGA committee FGD, with 5 women and 3 men identified and scored the changes for women on a scale of 1 to 10.

**Table 7: Changes for women in Madhya *para* (scale of 0-10)**

Change	Before Nijera	Present time
Value of women in society	1	8
Participation in <i>salish</i>	0	6
Relationship rich-poor	2	7
Women’s mobility	3	7

Women's participation in IGAs	2	8
Women's courage/confidence	2	8

A separate FGD with women working in different IGAs (6 women) identified two main areas of change: income and mobility. For income, they felt they had achieved 25% of what they wanted and for mobility 50%; which is very similar to the above scores. Aspirations are therefore high.

In Mankira *para*, the women's wages and fistful of rice interest group, with 8 women, identified key changes. Scores are presented on a scale of 0-16 (anas).

**Table 8: Changes for women in Mankira *para* (scale of 0-16)**

Change	Before Nijera	Present time
Equal wages with men	10	16
Loans from landlords ( <i>dadon</i> )	16	4
Seasonal hunger ( <i>monga</i> )	14	6
Women's mobility	0	8
Men's attitude to women	4	12

This group explained that they are now on equal wages and the loans they had to take from landlords have decreased. In the past, they were very dependent and had to carry out all kinds of unpaid housework as well. Hunger has reduced with increased incomes and the fistful of rice saving. Women's mobility has increased and men's attitude to women is more positive, although they would like to see further change in both these dimensions.

Women and men in the same interest group in **Dhakin *para*** gave similar scores to reduced hunger (16 to 6); *dadon* is now only taken by two households out of 45; men's belief in women's potential has risen from 3 to 13 and quarrels between husbands and wives reduced from 16 to 8. In addition, they felt that women's confidence and ability to articulate their views had improved from 4 to 12.

The FGDs with women NLs focused on changes in the **importance** of the organizations with which they interacted (as identified in discussion). Thus changes in the actual functioning of the organizations were not the focus. The scores on a scale of 0 to 16 (using anas) before the project and in the present, for the women NLs are given below.

**Table 9 : The changing importance of organizations to women in Madhya *para***

Organization/ institutions	Before Nijera	Present time
<i>Samaj</i>	2	12
<i>Gusti</i>	5	11
<i>Salish</i>	0	10
UP	0	5
Market	1	5
Herbal doctor	5	3
Village doctor	10	1
Family planning	3	8
Mobile phone		

booth	0	8
Grameen	4	2
BRAC	6	6
Hospital	1	10
Care office	0	5

Women interact more with *samaj* and *gusti* structures and for the first time, with *salish* and UP, so scores have increased. A mobile phone booth has also been installed nearby and that and women now go to that and the CARE office. Women do not use the herbal and village doctors so much, opting to use the hospital, since they now have the confidence to use the service. The same is true for family planning services. The market is more important to women. While BRAC remains an important organization, dependence on Grameen Bank for loans has decreased.

#### 4. Conclusions and reflections

##### 4.1 Nijera's approach to women's empowerment

The cornerstone of Nijera's approach is facilitation, inspired by a Freirian "conscientisation" approach. Such facilitation not only has to counter a culture of patronage and dependency relations between classes, but also one of severe inequalities in status between women and men. The interaction of class and gender inequalities tends to produce a very disempowering situation for poor women in Bangladesh. 'Power within', or a sense of individual selfhood (with human, equal rights) and self respect is possibly a more important dimension of empowerment than in many contexts. In this regard, a key issue is how CARE facilitators interact with women and men, to counteract stereotypes and encourage women to come forward and stay forward, when gender-based resistance is inevitably produced. Facilitation has to encourage women to build their 'courage' (*shahosh*), to support each other and change internalized views of their own standing vis a vis men in their communities. This requires changes in mindset as well as active strategizing – and this process has been building in Nijera over the last year or so. Just as staff are clear about well being categories and have strategies to deal with possible resistance from elites, so staff are developing strategies to deal with resistance from men, including the support of men who can be 'role models'. Of course, women themselves have a range of strategies, many of which became apparent during the SII.

In the discussions with interest groups, members of which are usually involved several Nijera activities, it became clear that entry strategies are extremely important. Success in some of the initial activities immediately enhances a sense of 'power to' change things. The fact that in many activities, success came because of unity and collective strategies enhances the importance of 'power with', working with others with whom there are common interests.

A quote from the Dhakin women's Savings Group illustrates the interactions between different dimensions of empowerment and the importance of collective strategies:

"Now, we women are united and our knowledge has increased in terms of livelihoods and how to improve things, for example, our vegetable production. We sit and exchange knowledge, learn from each other. We do this regularly and if one of us has a problem, we all help to resolve it. And everyone knows we are united and they don't disturb us. The relationships between us are stronger. Earlier, when one of us had a problem, each would discuss with her family to resolve – now we have 14 other people to discuss and help. Now that we are united, everyone in the community

values us. Earlier, when there was conflict, we never went, now we try and go and help and because we are many, people respect us. All this has been possible because CARE and two Natural Leaders in the group have showed us how to sit together and work things out.”

When it came to attributing scores to changes, the scores and the discussions made it clear that the project approach is working - aspirations of further positive change are high (for both women and men) and this only happens with a sense of empowerment! On a more cautionary note, empowerment is a process rather than a state, and sustaining a positive process is no easy challenge given the entrenched structures of class and gender subordination.

Nijera has achieved an enormous amount in a short space of time in terms of building women’s agency, supporting them to change relationships in their locality and to pursue their own goals. While there have been fewer changes in the structures which disempower women, women’s ability to engage with more powerful actors has increased. The way in which such practices and strategies begin to influence and shape rules and norms are also evident.

While there are huge gender inequalities in Bangladesh which have been discussed in other SII reports, there are many elements in the context in north-west Bangladesh which support action for women’s empowerment - including greater demands for labor, expanding markets and connections with Dhaka as well as ongoing government policies and NGO work to support women and to work on issues and structures which disempower women.

The SII framework has been useful to examine different dimensions of women’s empowerment. Beginning with context-specific perceptions of empowerment has been useful, as it suggests some dimensions may be more important than others and adds some dimensions to the framework. For poor women, food security and income to meet basic household needs are very important. The extent to which women have emphasized collective discussion of problems and collective strategies for change are not always present in some discussions of empowerment. The ability to give to others is important, in a context in which Islamic teaching emphasizes giving to the less fortunate (although this may not be practiced and interpreted in different ways). For example, researchers have argued that in the restrictive environment in Bangladesh, women often decide to avoid overt conflict and assert agency indirectly, through negotiations with their husbands and aspiring for jointness in management of the household, since acting independently may mean a loss of material and social support. While more in-depth research may be needed, it may be that joint decision making is not only pursued tactically but may be a desired end, and collective strategies may be or become a preferred way of doing things.

This kind of issue raises the question of “empowerment for what” - and the differences between individual empowerment to ‘make it’ in current market-oriented societies and collective strategies for alternative and more egalitarian visions of development.

The chairman of Mohadpur union summarizes the changes he has witnessed in Jalagari in the following way:

“There is a big development in that women and men work together. Women are active in homestead gardens, tree planting, share rearing.. they are trying heart and soul for their own development and using every opportunity they get. There are changes in women’s appearance, in the language they use. As development comes, *samaj* will change their views of women. Women have got some control of

family decisions. These changes in decision making are greater in poorer households. Men are not 'taking it easy' (relaxed about it) but many understand that women can play a part in development."

This is an optimistic view of how development will change societal views of women. Throughout this report, there are examples of the resistance that women face to changing their roles and relations in society and their status, and we need to look more closely at what will nurture and develop the changes which have been set in motion.

#### **4.2 Class-based approaches to women's empowerment**

I have been asked to reflect on Nijera's "class based approach to women's empowerment". Gender and class interact at different levels and in different ways, and there has been a long struggle to get recognition in development agencies that gender is important AND that women are not a homogenous group. We know that class-based movements do not always support women's rights to the same extent as men's and there are many historical examples of liberation movements and class-based 'socialist' transformation to illustrate the way in which women's aspirations are not met. This is one of the reasons for explicit work on 'women's rights as human rights'. On the other hand, some versions of feminism which strive for 'sisterhood' are sadly lacking in class analysis and an appreciation of how fundamentally class affects women's identity, priorities and strategies.

The perspective of poor women provides a unique and powerful vantage point from which to examine development strategies (see Gita Sen and Caren Grown, 1985 for a fuller discussion). Firstly, women constitute the majority of the economically and socially disadvantaged in most societies, suffering additional burdens imposed by gender-based hierarchies and subordination. Secondly, women's work in the survival, ongoing reproduction and care of human beings is critical and yet continues to be undervalued in dominant market-led ideas about development. Thirdly, gender-based inequalities are used to undermine the wages and working conditions of an increasing pool of women's labor used in fuelling economic growth, export-led industries being a case in point. Thus a vision of development which emphasizes rights, inclusion and equality must take both class and gender into account.

Developing the political will for such changes in structure requires strong local organization which can pressure for such a vision and demand the accountability which may make it possible. Nijera has started such a process in a short time with tangible gains to the poorest groups in the areas where Nijera is working. Women, where they have seen the avenues for change, have pursued them, possibly with even more commitment, and certainly in the face of greater resistance, than men. It is therefore essential that the Nijera initiative continues to support the process and makes sure that there is sufficient attention to women as well as men's self-realization and empowerment.

#### **4.3 Challenges and suggestions**

The quality of CARE's facilitation and support to Natural Leaders is one key to maintaining a gender perspective and support to women's empowerment. CARE's SDU is discussing how to scale up their approach and activities, for example, by having more than one hub or 'main *para*' from which to spread. Staff are also mindful of the need to provide strong support in the early stages while maintaining limited dependency on CARE. One clear message in this SII was that in the extension *paras*, there is a need for CARE staff to work with Natural

Leaders. The other is that NLs need the capacity building experiences that CARE's SDU provides. This recommendation for ongoing support from CARE, or at least, for CARE not to pull out too quickly, came from NLs and interest groups, and from interviews with other *para* residents, elected leaders and NGOs. In a sense, this is to be expected, but should nevertheless be carefully considered. While CARE may not want to increase dependency on the organization, its presence does function to support the countervailing power of disadvantaged groups. In Uttar *para*, in particular, NLs wanted more support. As the female NL put it: "CARE facilitators always go to Madhya *para*. If they gave us attention, it will help us go a long way. We need suggestions and inputs for women's income generating activities". This request is also probably linked to the IGA fund that Madhya *para* received.

There are few development initiatives which can point to positive results in such a short time, and it would be a great shame not to build on the energy generated for change, by having unrealistic ideas about short 'project' time frames. One of the repeated suggestions from interest groups and Natural Leaders, particularly in the main *paras*, was for CARE to support them in a) providing a meeting place at *para* level and b) supporting them in expanding IGAs, for example, through village industries and poultry and livestock farms.

Nijera staff has greatly extended an appreciation of gender issues in the last two years, and even in the last year that I have worked with the SDU team, the mindset and awareness of gender issues has changed. In the session with CARE facilitators working in the two SII sites, we had a short but useful discussion on what has been learnt on women's empowerment from this SII. As in the earlier research on women's empowerment, there were some interesting lessons and insights from staff.

One male facilitator explained how much stronger a community-led process was when women and men are involved, citing the example of Mankira. Another felt that women's income was important, and even drew back husbands who had left women. And another pointed out how men used to think that women 'could not survive if the husband dies', but are now changing their views. One male facilitator felt that women also set boundaries to their own agency/activities, but the women facilitators all felt that there are always women who want to cross such boundaries. One long standing female member of staff commented "After many years of working in CARE, I have hardly produced any community leaders, yet in the past two years 60 NLs have emerged in Mankira (cluster) alone, of which 50 percent are women." The same facilitator recognized that small things can make a difference: the names of women in well-being categories should be listed, not just the names of the husband. Similarly, encouraging the active participation of women in meetings, training, cross visits and so on should be an ongoing focus.

The facilitators agreed that women were not involved as men in interacting with powerful people and structures, and that this is connected to issues of mobility. Women-to-women learning remains an important way of increasing these dimensions of women's empowerment.

The final session with the research team reinforced the value of Nijera's approach and the positive changes which have resulted. It was recognized that the processes of change in the extension *paras* were not as extensive or established as in the main *paras*. The importance of the Natural Leaders was emphasized: "the more NLs are developed, the better the initiatives" but there was also a caution to "think about many women, not just natural leaders." In addition, it was felt that SDU should also reinforce its work with government, service providers and other NGOs.



Just as the research into women's empowerment was used as a valuable learning experience, so CARE staff have thoughtfully engaged with, contributed to and learnt from the SIIs.

One final suggestion is called for. There are few NGOs working with a similar approach in Bangladesh, given that so many NGOs work on individual market participation as a route to empowerment. One of them is Nijera Kori, which has been in existence since 1981. It's approach is also inspired by Freire and it aims to build the collective capabilities of poor women and men to claim their rights as citizens. Nijera Kori's strategies have much in common with Nijera (self-realization, organization e.g. savings groups, collective action e.g. struggles over land, wages and so on) and Nijera Kori's staff are also expected to work as change agents (but they face problems of high turnover given the salary levels paid by other NGOs). Since they have a much longer history, it may be important to organize a dialogue/cross visit for CARE staff.

#### **4.4 Reflections on the SII Methodology**

The SII methodology that we have used is basically sound and fit for purpose. The qualitative methods and PRA-type exercises we have used have encouraged active participation of project participants and there was consistent feedback that the experience had been useful and had encouraged people to reflect and to think about future strategies. As the engagement of the CARE staff discussed above showed, staff have both learned from and contributed to the SII and feel that their capabilities to promote women's empowerment is increased by such work.

However, it is worth bearing in mind some caveats and issues for reflection. The first is the need to be careful and rigorous with the sampling to avoid bias in selection and to get as wide and representative a set of views as possible. The second is that sample size does matter. For example, in this SII, where we canvassed the views of a wider set of para residents, it would have been better, had time allowed, to increase the number of interviews and sample purposefully for other groups, such as adolescent boys and girls, to understand the impacts of Nijera on them.

Where staff select respondents purposefully to illustrate positive project-related changes, as we did for positive success stories of improvements in well-being, it is important to state this is a transparent way.

While the issue of attribution is always complex the SIIs tend to show that respondents can quite easily differentiate between changes that are specifically a result of project activities and elements in the context that also support progressive change.

The CARE SIIs aim to serve multiple purposes. Some of these demand different methods to others. One purpose is to carry out research that is empowering in itself. Nijera could do more to fulfill this purpose by expanding methods and involvement of community members in assessing changes, for example, the use of video by Natural Leaders (women and men) to record events and discussions. Another purpose is to share CARE's successes and challenges with the wider development community, which may require a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Combining methods would allow a greater understanding of the pattern of changes observed in the field and some measure of the scale of such changes.