

Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment

REPORT 1

Introduction to
Strategic Impact Inquiry on
Women's Empowerment

CARE Bangladesh

CARE International Vision

We seek a world of hope, tolerance and social justice, where poverty has been overcome and people live in dignity and security.

CARE International will be a global force and a partner of choice within a worldwide movement dedicated to ending poverty. We will be known everywhere for our unshakable commitment to the dignity of people.



Background

Six years ago, CARE International made a commitment to an ambitious set of program principles to guide our work towards achieving our vision. The strategic impact inquiry on women's empowerment is one of the ways in which CARE intends to live by this commitment and contribute to deeper and more enduring social change.

CARE International Program Principles

Principle 1: Promote empowerment

Principle 2: Work in partnership with others

Principle 3: Ensure accountability and promote responsibility

Principle 4: Address discrimination

Principle 5: Promote the non-violent resolution of conflicts

Principle 6: Seek sustainable results

We hold ourselves accountable for enacting behaviors consistent with these principles, and ask others to help us do so...
in all that we do.

The strategic impact inquiry is a global evolutionary process involving original field research by multiple CARE country offices around the world to assess if our work is having an impact on women's empowerment. At the end of the second phase in October 2006, having run for just over two years, the initiative was able to draw findings from 30 research sites, and secondary data from nearly 1,000 projects in CARE International's portfolio that make some claim to advancing the rights and well being of women and girls.

In Bangladesh the SII Process sought answers to the following questions:

- How do we understand women's empowerment in Bangladesh?
- To develop a detailed impact inquiry methodology for CARE Bangladesh
- Has CARE Bangladesh had an impact on women's empowerment? Why/ Why not? How?
- To understand and use the findings of the Strategic Impact Inquiry in our work

CARE Bangladesh initially selected three interventions to focus on for the strategic impact inquiry:

- Partnership for a Healthy Life (PHL): an initiative that seeks to reduce the levels of violence against women;
- Nijeder Janiya Nijera (Nijera): a pilot that works with poor men and women to articulate and pursue their own vision of development; and
- Women and Markets: a component of the former Integrated Food Security Program (IFSP) designed to empower women economically and increase their presence in markets.

In the second year of work, as the actual impact research was being planned, CARE Bangladesh decided to add a fourth intervention - the Rural Maintenance Program (RMP), a cash-for-work program that employed able-bodied, destitute women across the country as crew members for road maintenance. In contrast to the other interventions being studied, RMP was a much larger and longer-term project running for over 20 years. CARE felt it was important that its legacy be examined more closely in terms of impact on women's empowerment. The SII has been completed in three of the four interventions selected and an internal review has been conducted to assess CARE Bangladesh's efforts to promote gender equity and diversity within the organization.



The Process

The process in Bangladesh was led by CARE's Social Development Unit, with the support of a small SII core team. It involved around 80 staff researchers, five consultants, numerous program participants, technical advisors from CARE USA, a few CARE staff from India and Nepal, and many others in coordination, management or support roles. The work was organized in two phases – a preparatory phase in 2005, and the actual impact inquiry in 2006.

In 2005, the preparatory work involved:

- 1) A process reconstruction of each SII project through review of project literature and discussions with senior level staff; and
- 2) A separate field based inquiry¹ intended to:
 - explore women's and men's own views of power and powerlessness and women's strategies to negotiate various forms of subordination; and
 - develop methodologies that assist projects/programs, including the strategic impact inquiry, within CARE Bangladesh to gain a better understanding of the micro-politics of gender dynamics and to explore what empowerment means to men and women from different social and economic backgrounds

In 2006 detailed impact inquiries were conducted for three interventions, taking a lead from key insights generated during the process reconstruction, and using the methods tested in the original field research. For each project, with the exception of RMP, detailed context analysis was conducted prior to the impact inquiry. The SII on women's empowerment in Bangladesh also included an internal organizational review that sought to examine the impact of the change strategy undertaken by CARE Bangladesh to address internal gender inequity.

In September 2006 a synthesis meeting was organized bringing together a mix of people from the research teams, other CARE Bangladesh staff, participants from CARE India and Nepal, and colleagues from other agencies in Bangladesh, to explore and interpret the findings, and discuss implications for the future.



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

A Description of the SII Women's Empowerment Framework

The global research protocols for the strategic impact inquiry proposed a framework based on three interrelated dimensions or faces of empowerment: agency, structure and social relations, testing a theory that enduring impacts on women's empowerment rely on critical changes across these three deeply inter-related dimensions. Twenty three evidence categories or sub-dimensions were identified as contributing to the three dimensions (see box). However, in practice, local research teams in each country began their work by surfacing women's own ideas of empowerment in their context.

“Agency” is about a woman's belief in her ability and actual ability to effect change in the world, in this case, change as defined in the strategic impact inquiry model in relation to pursuit of basic needs and rights. Agency reflects the aspirations, resources, actions and achievements of women themselves. Every woman has agency, and analyzes, decides, and acts without CARE being involved. Sometimes she does so in ways that challenge gendered power inequities; sometimes, in ways that reinforce them. Empowerment entails a journey through which she increasingly uses her agency to expand options and challenge inequities.

“Relations” has to do with networks and relationships with others through which agency may operate. Relations are the vehicle through which women negotiate their needs and rights. Empowerment, in part, relies on individual women building relationships, joint efforts, coalitions, and mutual support, in order to claim and expand agency, alter inequitable structures, and so realize rights and livelihood security.

“Structure” has to do with socially constructed (cultural, social and political) institutions, norms, values, attitudes and beliefs which affect women's agency. Structures are the accepted rules, norms and institutions that condition women's choices and chances. Structures can be both tangible and intangible; behaviors and ideologies. Examples include kinship, economic markets, religion, caste and other social hierarchies, educational systems, political culture, forms of organization, and many, more.

SUB-DIMENSIONS OF AGENCY

1. Self-image; self-esteem
2. Legal / rights awareness
3. Information / skills
4. Educational attainment
5. Employment / control of labor
6. Mobility in public space
7. Decision influence in HH finance & child-rearing
8. Group membership / activism
9. Material assets owned
10. Body health / integrity

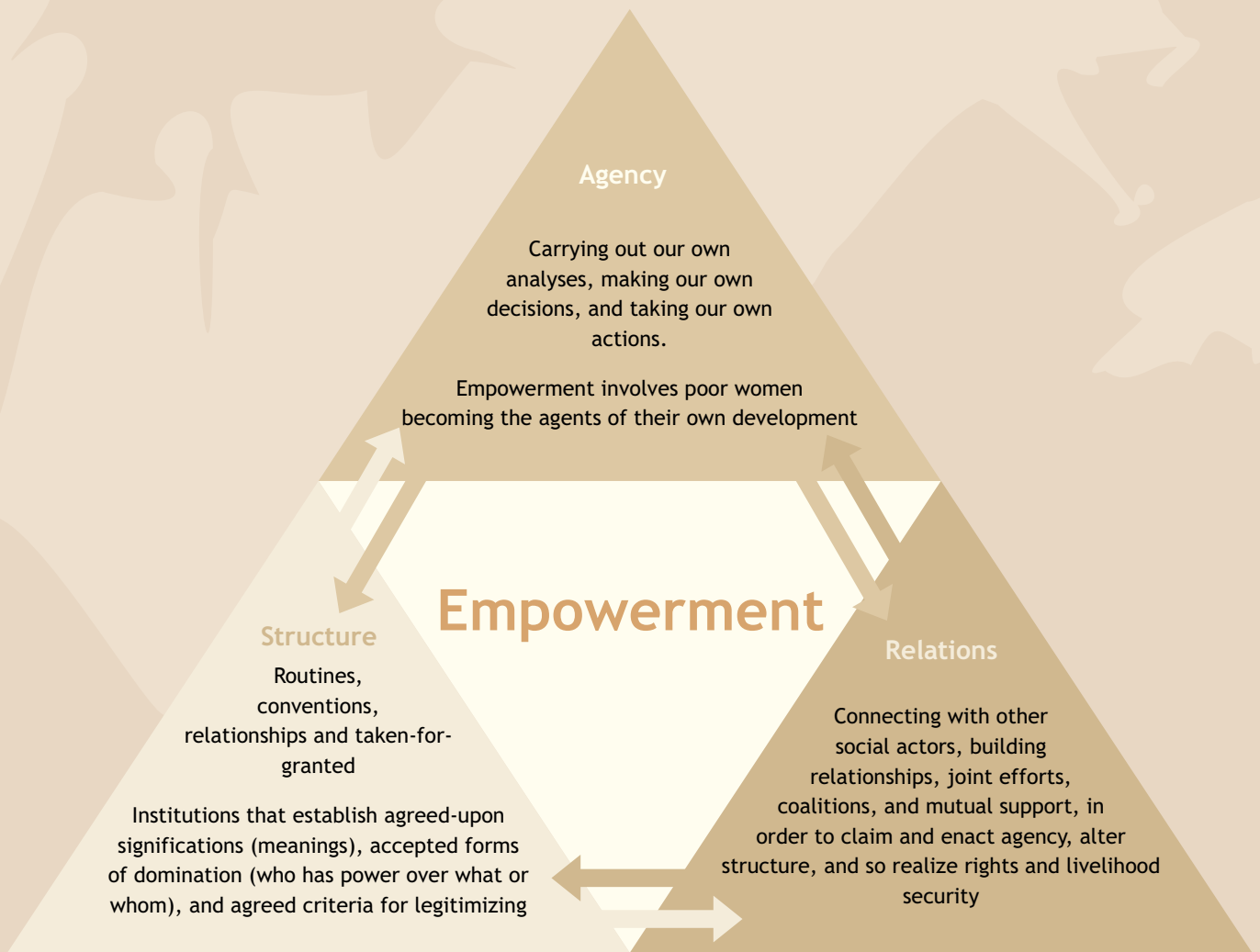
SUB-DIMENSIONS OF RELATIONS

1. Density of civil society representation
2. Consciousness of self / others as inter-dependent
3. Negotiation/ Accommodation habits
4. Alliance/Coalition habits
5. Pursuit / acceptance of accountability
6. New social forms

SUB-DIMENSIONS OF STRUCTURE

1. Marriage/Kinship rules & roles
2. Inclusive & equitable notions of citizenship
3. Transparent information & access to services
4. Enforceability of rights, access to justice
5. Market accessibility (labor/credits/goods)
6. Political representation
7. Share of state budgets





(Reproduced from SII Women's Empowerment Global Framework June 2006)

In Bangladesh the literature review initiated during the first phase was instrumental in triggering internal discussion and a spirit of inquiry among staff. Following the review, a primary field study was conducted in 2005 to understand, in particular, women's perceptions of power, and the areas in which it most affected and constrained their lives (Kanji, Bode and Haq 2005). This was conducted in Jalagari village, one of the four initial sites of the Nijera project in Rangpur District, north-western Bangladesh. This field research was instrumental in helping to identify the most important gender issues that were important to include in the impact inquiry. From the work conducted in the first phase in Bangladesh, it was concluded that key gender issues that should be examined for impact 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 and how practices around justice are shaped by local context, and
- Women's political participation

“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.”

- Quote from one of the Nijera participants.

Male shalishkar participated in the training with me; they are okay.
Generally lots of men comment: why does she speak so much? But this used to be about 90% of men, now it has reduced to 30%. When I was elected lots of people, even my relatives, said “I will become rotten”

- said a woman shalishkar from the PHL project

I was helpless before; today I am respected and not helpless.

- said a woman from RMP project.

In addition, it was considered that further analytical work in 2006 should be disaggregated in relation to class, income, age, religion and household structure and composition. Since, women's stage in their life cycle and social position within households has an important bearing on their authority, autonomy, household status and livelihood options, it was agreed that careful sampling and analysis was required on how these factors intersect with class and religion. It was expected that the strategic impact inquiry would generate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ways in which these various factors interact and the opportunities and constraints that different groups of women face. It was also hoped that the strategic impact inquiry would reveal differential impacts of CARE's programs on different groups of women, with important implications for future programming. It is this understanding of women's perceptions of power and powerlessness that has been the basis of inquiry in Bangladesh.

While the global framework served well to provide a basic framework within which discussions took place globally, much was learned about the framework itself and inter-relationships between the three dimensions during the research process. For example, the RMP study notes the difficulties presented by treating the three dimensions (agency, structure and relations) as analytically separate and distinct, and findings from the RMP study suggest that the three dimensions are interrelated in complex ways.

Similar observations emerged from global synthesis discussions that brought together researchers from around the world, recommending that greater attention be paid to the interactions between the three domains in nurturing seedlings of transformational change. Another suggestion was for greater recognition of the relative weights of different domains in different contexts, thus suggesting that the framework triangle does not always appear equilateral. Discussions of findings from around the world highlighted the relational domain as critical in women's priorities for social change. There was also a call for recognition of the different perspectives and ideologies that could potentially underlie each of the domains. But perhaps the most important insight and learning around our women's empowerment research framework is that if we want to understand empowerment, we must understand how power shapes the stories that people can tell, and the stories we are able to hear. It is therefore essential that our future research on this theme focus on issues such as power, patriarchy and resistance to inform our conceptual understanding of empowerment.



In Conclusion

Towards the end of 2006, through a series of workshops and meetings, CARE Bangladesh facilitated a synthesis process to review the findings emerging from each of the SII studies, and to explore the implications of these findings for future work related to women's empowerment. Feedback from project participants present at the SII Synthesis meeting held in Dhaka in September clearly indicated that, while there had been significant impact on the lives of women involved in CARE projects, what was needed was greater impact on institutions such as dowry, early marriage, women's security, women's leadership and cohesiveness of the women's movement. Findings and implications from the research in Bangladesh are outlined in the enclosed summary reports and briefing notes.

Reflections from the synthesis process in Bangladesh and beyond provide some valuable recommendations and make a compelling case for critical programmatic and organizational change in order to achieve the impact we seek on women's empowerment. Perhaps the most significant 'take-away' from our research in Bangladesh is the critical need to move from a short-term project approach to long-term programming with clear strategies to address structural constraints. Another key lesson is the value of linking strategically with other players at all levels, from local to national, in order to have any chance of addressing the deeper structural issues that perpetuate gender inequity.

Our participation in the strategic impact inquiry on women's empowerment opened new doors as our project sites were transformed to sites of learning and reflection. This experience has been a key factor in prompting CARE Bangladesh to focus on building a learning culture as one of its strategic directions over the next five years. It has also prompted frontline staff in some of our field offices to form their own solidarity groups as they recognized the value of collective solidarity for empowerment. As women's empowerment is unfolded through a continuous process of reflection on the findings and recommendations emerging from the SII studies, CARE Bangladesh gears itself to reshape its change agenda for women's empowerment.



CARE Bangladesh
Pragati RPR Center (9th-13th floor)
20-21 Kawran Bazar
Dhaka-1215, Bangladesh
Country/City Code: +880-2
Phone: 9112315, 8114207
Fax: 8114183
E-mail: carebang@bangla.net
www.carebd.org