Strategic Impact Inquiry

on Women's Empowerment

Brief on

Methods of Strategic Impact Inquiry CARE Bangladesh

Background

CARE's global Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII)[1] initiative on women's empowerment was designed to enable each participating country office to tailor its research to the context in which it operates. CARE Bangladesh has been working for the empowerment of women for over two decades. Gender programming had evolved from emphasizing women's economic empowerment to exploring more holistic approaches that increasingly focused on reducing women's social and political marginalization. The SII thus represented an opportunity for the organization to explore and reflect upon its impact on women's empowerment across some of the more innovative pilot programs that work through multi-dimensional interventions as well as one of the largest projects that had been implemented for a longer time. Four initiatives were chosen for the inquiry. Of these, the inquiry has been completed in three projects.

The projects that were chosen for SII were:

1) **Partnership for a Healthy Life (PHL)** a project that seeks to reduce the levels of violence against women;

2) **Women and Markets**[2], a component of the former Integrated Food Security Program (Title II) program, designed to empower women economically and increase their presence in markets;

3) **Nijeder Janyia Nijera (Nijera),** an initiative that works with poor men and women to articulate and pursue their own vision of development; and

4) **Rural Maintenance Program (RMP)**, a cash for work program for destitute, able-bodied women that operated from 1983 to 2006.

For each project, a **process reconstruction** was conducted, largely through a literature review of project documentation, with some interviews of key personnel. These literature reviews discussed the various gender studies that informed the projects and the strategies that were adopted in implementation. Further, the work systematically looked at project approaches in the context of the SII research framework that emphasized the importance of structure, relations and agency[3]. Reconstruction of process also contributed to the development of research questions.

Preceding the impact analyses, however, a context analysis exploring the Perceptions, Boundaries and Strategies around Women's Empowerment, was carried out to explore women's and men's own views of power and powerlessness; and to develop methodologies to explore the micro-dynamics of gender dynamics and what empowerment means to men and women from different backgrounds.

From the work conducted in this first phase (2005-06), 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 the larger locality
- Women's political participation

In addition, it was considered that further analytical work in the second phase (2006) should be disaggregated in relation to class, income, age, religion and household structure and composition. Since, the stage women are at in their life cycle and their social position within households was observed as having an important bearing on their authority, autonomy, household status and livelihood options, it was decided that careful sampling and analysis would be required to understand how these factors intersect with class and religion.

In 2006, as part of the second phase, CARE Bangladesh conducted three detailed impact studies, using and improving upon the methods developed during the initial context analysis, to understand and analyze its relative impact on women's empowerment. In addition, a complementary review of the impact of internal organizational change efforts to promote women's empowerment within CARE Bangladesh was undertaken. A synthesis event that aimed to begin the process of bringing together the different dimensions of this work and to provide a specific set of recommendations for the country office on ways to improve the nature and impact of its work on women's empowerment in the future was held in September 2006.

Exploring Women's Empowerment: Perceptions, Boundaries and Strategies

The first research initiative of the Strategic Impact Inquiry was a context analysis in one community focusing on women's agency. This work included an analysis of the local context and was designed to better understand the strategies that women use to further their interests in daily life. The study also explored women's views of empowerment and the way in which men view current changes in social and gender norms. The study particularly looked at women's networks, mobility, strategies to negotiate inequalities and exclusion, and who sets boundaries around gender norms. This study also explored the larger context (union level) within which the study community is located and looked at power dynamics related to key areas such as: control over resources (land, labor, government development funds), influence in key decisions (local dispute arbitration), understanding of vote banks and resource distribution, who makes decisions. A key objective of this work was to develop methods to study impact and ways to explore sensitive issues.

Power Analysis

The research began by considering the union level power structure, the administration of local justice (*shalish*[4]), voting practices, level of participation of locally elected women members of *Union Parishad* and poverty alleviation schemes designed to assist women headed households[5]. Methods used included mapping of union infrastructure and key actors, interviews exploring elite behavior and practices around resource allocation, women's participation in key committees and *shalish*, and local elections. The persons interviewed included people from all socio-economic groups, as well as the available individual elected members. They were asked about voting practices and women's participation in key committees and *shalish*. These methods of mapping, power net analysis, and critical *shalish* cases *were* also used to understand the unions in which the SII for the Partnership for Healthy Life and the Nijera pilot were conducted.

To understand how the **practices around governance** influence the social dynamics in the study community, a Muslim *para*[6] in Gaibanda district, with 95 households, the work explored the ways in which class and kinship intersect with vote purchasing, *shalish* and the distribution of entitlements. Methods included objective wealth ranking (land owned and primary source of income), and subjective well being grouping (based on a local definition of well being); and the construction of the community genealogies.

To understand **women's mobility and the types of interactions** they have with kin and non-kin within and outside their hamlet, the well being ranking was used to select women to construct network diagrams. Four such diagrams were created, with one woman from each well being ranking, thus excluding a woman from the medium group, because of time constraints. These diagrams were then shared with other women of different socio-economic backgrounds to gain a sense of whether the findings were representative within the community.

Gender Boundaries, Perceptions and Strategies

The sampling for the research was based on the prior well being grouping exercise which divided the community into five categories: well off (12), middle (28), lower middle (18), poor (28), and very poor (9). The nine poorest households in the community only have homesteads land and are all female headed.

To explore gender boundaries, the research looked at differences in the ways parents brought up girls and boys, the consequences of inequalities and how things might be changing. Three women and three men from middle or poor households were interviewed.

To gain a sense of control over decision-making, individual interviews were carried out with 11 women and 11 men to discuss women's control over resources, how and what types of decisions are made, and the strategies they use to influence decisions made by men. The interviews were semi-structured and used key personal events in the women's lives as the basis for discussing decision-making, women's interpretation and use of power. Interviews were carried out across a spread of wealth groupings, younger/older women and men, in nuclear and joint households.

The interview checklist was generated from relevant literature and discussions with field facilitators who know the local context. Specific questions on 'power' and 'empowerment' were discussed and translated as 'strength', 'influence' and control. The interview was piloted in the field and changes were made. The checklist was also adapted for interviews with men. As preparation, a mock interview between a researcher and a field facilitator was observed by the other facilitators who then carried out the interviews in the *para*.

In order to examine issues of **power, conflict and violence**, 12 village women were invited to a workshop to consider situations which provoke violence at the household level, to discuss what happens and why, and how women try and avoid or resolve such violent conflict. The women were from poorer households (the two lowest wealth categories) and almost all of them were leaders in NGO activities. Scenarios around violence against women were created and acted out. This helped to de-personalize sensitive issues. However, the women were increasingly open about their own experiences as the workshop progressed, reflecting not only their relationship with the researchers but also the extent to which violence is part of their lives. It was important to begin and end with less distressing topics. The participants adapted scenarios and added issues.

On Research Design, Objectivity, and Triangulation

Each impact analysis began with a meeting where the researchers and the project staff discussed the analytical framework of the SII, and laid out the project objectives and activities. In all cases except for RMP, a context analysis was completed before the impact analysis began. This enabled the researchers and the project staff to make decisions on the locations to be studied. Methods and tools were developed collectively with the team of researchers working in groups to develop detailed questions around the main issues and topics to be explored with respondents. The work proceeded through an iterative process of fieldwork and feedback sessions to discuss difficulties, promote learning, and identify gaps in knowledge and understanding. Interviewers worked in carefully chosen pairs. To ensure objectivity, non-project staff took the lead in interviewing, whilst project staff were recorders. Women were paired with men; and care was taken to ensure at least one Hindu interviewer in the pairs working in the Hindu para.

The use of triangulation in different ways has been one of the major means employed to establish rigor:

- of methods: different methods being used to look for similar data

- of locations: comparative sites used within and across the project impact studies

- of people: different people being asked similar questions

- of researchers: different lead researchers engaging in similar enquiries

Partnership for a Healthy Life (PHL)

The location for the SII in PHL was Ishania Union, the pilot union with the most extensive project activities, and where 20 Violence Against Women (VAW) Forums have been set up. Given time constraints, the research was limited to two villages representing a range of the best functioning VAW Forum and one of the worst.

To explore the impact of the project's awareness raising and advocacy activities, two *para* (one Hindu and one Muslim) within each village were selected to reflect both religious groups. Working on the basis of available researchers and time limitations 18 interviews were carried out in each of the two village locations (36 interviews in total). In each, nine men and nine women, drawn from three wealth categories, better off, middle and poor households, were interviewed. Although the sample was small, it attempted to interview residents on the basis of wealth, religion and gender. The themes explored included: knowledge of the project, awareness of messages, participation in activities, major changes in his/her life in the past two years, impact of project activities on attitudes (own and wider), impact on behavior (own and wider), any major changes as a result of project (in mobility, confidence, dowry, violence and any other issue that the respondent raises), what could be done better.

To understand the working of the VAW Forums, group discussion with forum members and a project assessment exercise was carried out. The group discussion focused on the following topics: Composition and profile of VAW Forums, training received, activities and levels of participation (as individual members and as a group), changes in the functioning and outcomes of *shalish*, what difference the project had made in terms of changes in own attitudes and behavior, and changes in community attitudes and behavior.

The final point led to a project assessment exercise, where the group was asked to generate a list of issues/problems which they were trying to address, each of which was noted on a card. They were then asked to discuss and score changes as a result of project activities on each issue, on a scale of 0 to 5. (A negative scale of 0 to 5 was also provided in case they felt there had been deterioration since the project began.) The main aim was to generate a discussion of impacts. At the end, there was a discussion of what could be done better to achieve project objectives.

To explore the **functioning and outcomes of *Shalish*** in relation to violence against women, a focus group discussion was held with the union-level *shalish* group (including Union Parishad[7] members), and a project assessment exercise was conducted with women *shalishkars*.

Finally, there were follow up **interviews with women affected by violence** with two pairs of experienced women researchers devoted to this difficult and sensitive task. A total of ten interviews, five in each of the two villages under the study, were carried out.

The VAW Forum selected cases from their records. The aim was to interview the women whose cases had been taken up in *shalish*. In practice, it was only possible to speak to women on their own (for at least part of the interview) in six cases. In three cases, women had separated from their husbands and were living in their natal homes, which made it easier to speak to them alone.

Nijeder Janyia Nijera (We, For Ourselves)

The *Nijeder Janyia Nijera (Nijera)* a community led pilot project works in a clustered approach (8 clusters), and two clusters were selected for the SII research based on agro-ecology (flood/ drought prone and land distribution).

The main questions that the SII set out to address were:

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?

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** of natural leaders, and four of other women who CARE staff considered had been particularly empowered by *Nijera,* were documented. A total of 38 interviews were carried out, 27 with *para* residents who were neither involved as natural leaders nor as *Nijera* committee members and interest groups; and the rest with elected officials, NGOs and selected elite members, including landlords. Finally, two local markets were visited/observed. The table below presents the individuals and groups included in the SII and the methods used for respective groups.

SII participants	Methods
Natural leaders	■ Focus group discussions with institutional analysis
	■ Individual women's participation stories
Interest groups	■ Focus group discussion with impact scoring
	■ Individual women's participation stories
Para 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

7. The Union Parishad is the governing body at union level (the lowest administrative unit of government). The Upazilla is a sub-district.

During the Focus group discussions 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** and their relationship to *Nijera* activities. During the focus group discussion 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. *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 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. 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.

The Rural Maintenance Program (RMP)

The RMP SII study was designed to explore the changes that had occurred in women's lives as a result of the program's intervention. It was conducted in three districts, designed to provide a cross-section of different social and cultural contexts across the country. Within each district, two unions were purposively selected allowing for the inclusion of groups of women who had already graduated from the program. Because of the larger number of unions, six in total, and time constraints, no context analyses were conducted.

For each district, the range of methods used in sequence were:

Focus group discussion with members of the **selected group of graduated women** in most cases 6-7 of the 10 women were available for this to look at the changes that had occurred in their lives during and after their time in the Road Management Associations.

Focus group discussion with **members of the Union *Parishad* (UP)**, including members of the oversight Project Management Committee, to ask them about the history of RMP in the union, the role of the Union *Parishad* and Project Management Committee in the project, and then the kinds of changes that have happened in the lives of women who have been part of RMP, as well as what has changed in the lives of women more broadly in the community.

Individual interviews of two kinds were conducted. First with all members of the graduated group, that sought to establish their **life histories** and the changes that had happened in their lives during their time as Road Management Association members and after they had graduated. And second, interviews with **selected members of the Union *Parishad*** and Project Management Committee that sought to establish their involvement with RMP (since RMP had also undertaken capacity building at the UP level), and their views of change in the lives of the RMP women and the extent to which they felt RMP had had any broader impact.

Focus group discussions with additional groups of women to undertake an analysis of wealth groups and **changes in the lives of women who were not part of Rural Maintenance Program**.

In the second week of work, **some men, and female and male children of graduates** were also interviewed in order to find out how their lives had been affected by their mother's (or women more broadly, in the case of the men) involvement in RMP.

Finally, an important part of the methodology for this impact study was the internal process used within the research team, whereby members were encouraged to reflect upon and analyze the principal findings themselves. They were asked to undertake this in two principal ways. One was to identify what they thought were the major changes that had occurred in women's lives. These changes in effect functioned as indicators, and the team clustered the in terms of the 'agency', 'structure' and 'relationships' categories of the SII empowerment framework. In each research area there was an attempt to synthesize a set of indicators from the findings, and in the final report these have been compared across the three districts. Second, the staff were asked to identify what they thought were the major implications of the findings if CARE Bangladesh was to improve the impact of its work on women's empowerment in the future. They were asked to make these recommendations not specific to RMP, since the project was closing.

Implications for Future Research

The qualitative methods and PRA- exercises used have encouraged active participation of project participants. The staff consistently provided feedback that the learning experience was both useful and encouraging for them to reflect and think about future strategies. It was in general felt that the exercise enhanced their capabilities to promote women's empowerment.

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 the *Nijera* and PHL SII, where researchers 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 impact on them.

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 SII provided the opportunity to explore a range of qualitative research methods for impact inquiry. While these methods and research design will be invaluable for future studies of this nature, more work is still required to draw links to the quantitative data available within CARE information systems. These links are being explored in ongoing efforts to improve program quality at CARE.

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.

One of the debates on methods related to the distinction between an evaluation and an inquiry. Participants had often to be reminded that the SII had never been intended as a form of evaluation, since in all cases there has been no attempt to conduct a broad evaluation of project outcomes. Rather, the studies have sought to understand different dimensions of women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. They also probed into the impact of CARE's work on facilitating greater empowerment for women, and utilized forms of purposive sampling that are not necessarily designed to provide a representative picture of the project being investigated.

This has led to questions about the degree to which results of the impact studies can be extrapolated to make statements about the projects in a broader sense. It remains a question, both of intent and the robustness of the methods. In fact, the question asked at the beginning of the synthesis process, 'What constitutes sufficient evidence?' is providing a focus for continued discussion around methods.